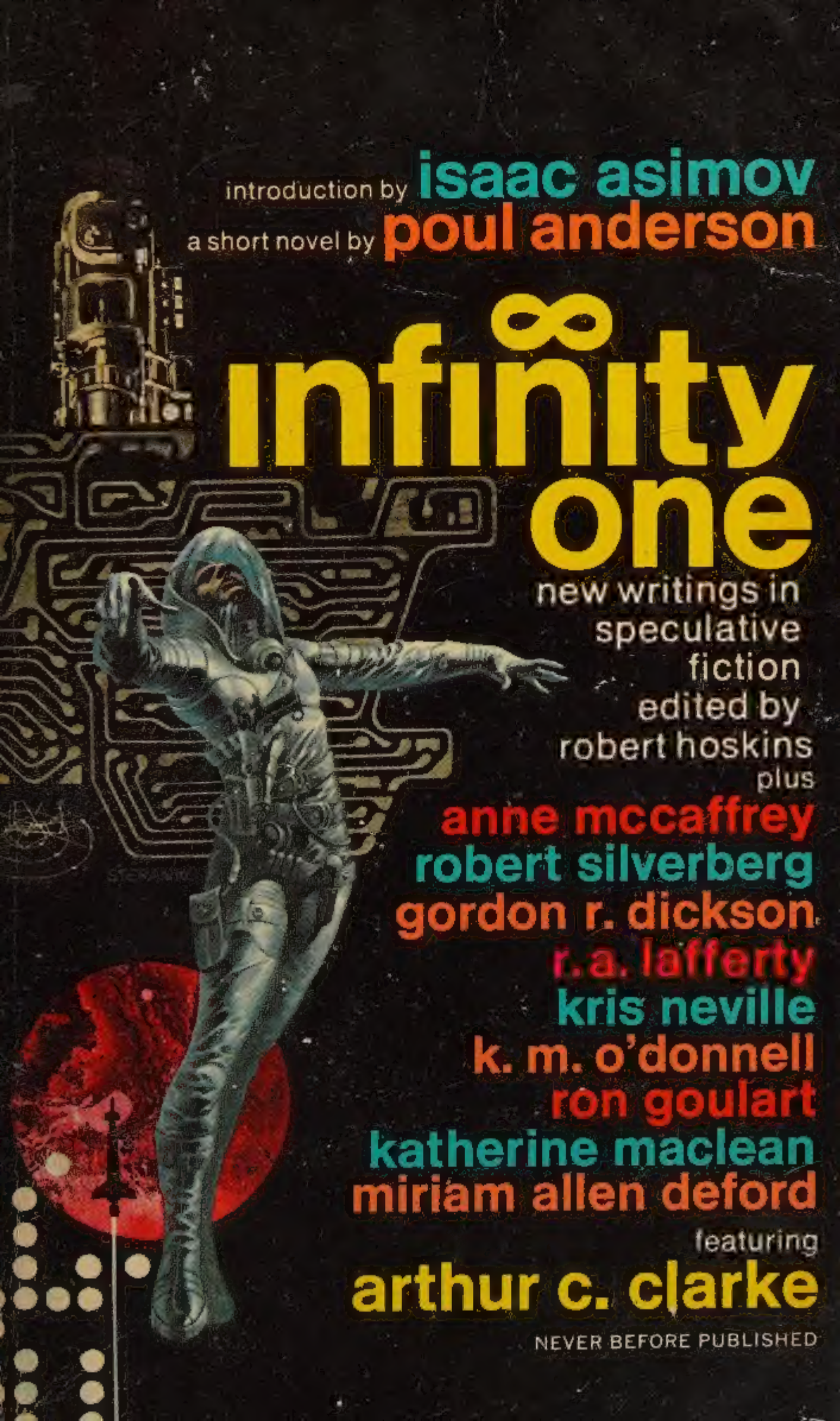




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INFINITY ONE



INTRODUCTION: The Fun In Future Fun

Isaac Asimov

Fun is where you find it and it is always to be found in feasting and laughing and loving and roughhousing and gambling and hiking and noise-making and yelling and moving chessmen and chasing rubber balls and sleeping in the sun and dancing and swimming and watching entertainers and risking one's neck for foolish reasons. There are even some fortunates who find their fun in their work—as does your humble servant.

Man was a tropical animal originally, confined to such areas as central Africa and to Indonesia (where the great apes of today are still confined); but then he discovered fire and all the realm of winter was open to him. Not only did the colder regions offer new lands, new foods and new dangers, but (eventually) a new world of fun, too, from snowball fights to skating and skiing.

The consequences of this long-past conquest of winter have about run their course. All the world now belongs to man and settlements can be established with reasonable comfort even in Greenland and Antarctica. For now, those polar establishments are intended for scientists and soldiers, but the tourists will eventually follow. People now alive may yet see the establishment of a Hilton-Antarctica or Sheraton-Greenland.

But by this opening of "all the world" to human occupancy, we mean dry land, of course. What about the sea and, in particular, the continental shelves?



If man can solve his social problems; if he can restrain his itch to set nuclear fire to himself, or breed himself into starvation; surely he will soon step back into the sea from which he sprung and the spires of his towers will begin to shine dimly beneath the waves.

Consider the dwellings of man-in-the-sea. Inside his water-tight sea-buildings, or perhaps under the water-tight dome that will enclose an entire settlement, he will live in air and have his usual fun. But outside the dome, there will be a world of water at his disposal.

To the sea-dwellers, water will be an ever-constant fact of life. Children will learn to swim as they learn to walk, and scuba-diving will be as common to them as hiking is to us. The sea will fill with flippered humanity hunting barracuda and exploring the drowned bottoms.

And how friendly will the new aquanauts become with sea-creatures? Will boys have their pet salmons, so to speak, who will follow them about in the water?

I suspect not. Fish are not very brainy. Yet there are sea-birds and sea-mammals that offer a far more hopeful prospect. There are penguins and seals and, in particular, dolphins, which are intelligent and friendly.

Even land-lubbing men get along with dolphins—but when men enter the sea, the friendship ought to get closer still. Dolphins are more intelligent than dogs (some suspect they may be more intelligent than men) and it may be that for the first time in history two species of intelligent creatures may meet on roughly equal terms.

And fun? Dolphin-riding ought to be a sensation that cannot possibly be duplicated on land, and I am certain that dolphins will instantly get into the spirit of the thing.

In all ordinary sea-sports, even for the sea-dwellers, humans must remain air-breathing. The buildings and settlements themselves will be air-immersed and a man who ventures into the sea will do so with oxygen cylinders strapped to himself.

But will that *always* be necessary? Successful experiments have already been conducted with water that has

been oxygenated under pressure. (After all, it is not the water that drowns you, but the oxygen-lack.) Enough oxygen can be forced into solution in water to support an air-breathing animal. Dogs can breathe such water and their lungs can scabble enough oxygen out of it to support life. Dogs have remained under water for extended periods and emerged none the worse for the ordeal.

Naturally, we can't oxygenate the entire ocean, but surely we can oxygenate indoor pools under pressure. Within those pools, men can swim as water-breathing creatures and, with no equipment at all, stay immersed for hours at a time. How it would feel, I can't possibly imagine. But I suspect it would introduce a new kind of freedom and a new sort of sensation that would be completely exciting to many.

Theoretically, we don't need a sea environment to make this form of recreation possible. (Let's call it "sub-water and breathing," or "swab" for short.) We can construct "swab" pools in Rockefeller Center if we wish and do so right now. However, persuading land-dwellers to immerse themselves in water and breathe may be most difficult. It would be far less difficult to persuade sea-dwellers—used to the friendly ocean—to do so. "Swab" may be the recreation of sea-dwellers only, however much it may be possible on land.

Then, of course, we have the Moon. This, at first, will consist only of specialists, scientists, technicians and explorers, remaining for short watches upon our satellite. Give us another generation and commercial flights to the Moon will be possible.

That might give us an answer, for the while, to the problem of "But where can one go that's really exciting?"

Just being on the Moon will certainly be fun and excitement enough for tourists. The scenery will be novel, and the sky overhead, in particular, will have the beauty of the never-seen. Imagine a black sky in which there are more and brighter stars than ever we see on Earth (because there is no atmosphere on the Moon to dim them).

Imagine too the Earth, as it hangs almost motionless in the sky, going through its phases like a vast and brilliant Moon!

The Earth in the Moon's sky is four times the width of the Moon as we see it from Earth. When the Earth is full it will be seventy times as bright as our full Moon. The Earth's globe will be bluish-white and its cloud pattern will mark it in stripes and whirlpools. Faint washes of green and brown may indicate the continents at time, but their outlines will rarely if ever be made out clearly.

At this writing, only two men have been fortunate enough to see these sights. By the time it appears, they will be joined by two, and perhaps four, more. Can anyone doubt that by the time this century is over, they will have been joined by many more?

There will be dangers on the Moon, of course, well familiar to readers of science fiction. Underground, however, none of these dangers, and the surface extremes of temperature, will exist and the Moon will be very comfortable.

Nor need the underground be viewed as nothing more than forever-imprisoning caves. Through television receivers, views of the outside and even (properly filtered) of the Sun itself can be shown. And men will be able to emerge comfortably in the early night when the Sun is below the horizon and when the cold is not yet at its worst.

Undoubtedly, the greatest sight of all, bar none—whether seen directly or by closed-circuit television within the underground—will be the occasions when the Sun slips behind the Earth. We see such occasions from the Earth as an eclipse of the Moon.

Once the Sun is behind the Earth, the globe of our planet will be entirely black (we will be seeing the night-side) but the atmosphere all about will blaze orange-red with the slanting rays of the Sun. It will be as though we were watching a sunset scene through all Earth's atmosphere at once. And around that large bright orange circle

in the sky will be the pearly streamers of the Sun's corona, visible far more brightly and clearly than ever on Earth. Beyond the corona will be the hard brilliance of the stars.

Passage to the Moon will surely be at a premium in the weeks before an eclipse of the Earth is due.

But the Moon will be more than a sight-seeing paradise. It will offer active sport to Earthmen, too, thanks to its gravity. Anyone on the Moon will be pulled downward with a force only one-sixth that which is experienced on the Earth. A man who weighs 180 pounds on the Earth will weigh only 30 pounds on the Moon. This will give rise to a whole new range of sensations and offer the pleasure of mastering a whole new range of skills.

Any physical activity from walking to playing football will require bodily maneuvering that will be perfected only after considerable practice. This is so, particularly, since although weight decreases, the mass of an object (the amount of matter it contains—which determines the difficulty of setting it into motion and getting it to stop) isn't changed. A medicine ball may weigh no more on the Moon than a football does on the Earth, but the medicine ball there will not at all be manipulated as easily as a football here. Its great mass will make the ball just as hard to throw on the Moon as on the Earth.

Eventually, games of "moon-ball" will have their own practitioners and their own expertise, their own rules and strategies and excitements. The "World Series on the Moon" between teams from underground stations at Tycho and Copernicus may well be followed avidly on Earth.

There will be mountain-climbing on the Moon, too, less dangerous and difficult—and therefore more nearly a mass sport in potentiality—than on the Earth. This is not a paradox. The mountain slopes on the Moon are gentle and the weak gravity is easy to overcome in the upward climb. Nor do the conditions on the mountain tops grow difficult. They are airless but so are the valleys.

On the other hand, if the mountain slopes are sandy enough, the weak gravity will make them quite slippery (the smaller the force pulling you down against the surface, the less the friction). There is already intimation that such might be the case, from the experiences of the Apollo 11 crew. Men, using flat-bottomed canes for support and balance, may go sliding down a mountain slope with all the effect of skiing, and do so (despite the necessity for spacesuits and oxygen cylinders) in greater safety than on Earth.

Lunar skiing may yet be the Moon's most popular sport in its early history as a human settlement.

But what about a world of no gravity at all? What about artificial space-stations built in orbit about the Earth?

The purposes of such space-stations will surely be purely scientific and astronautic (a discussion of militarism has no place in an examination of the fun aspects of human living) at first, but by the time the Moon has become a tourists' paradise (and perhaps a little "spoiled") surely some space station will be hanging in the Earth's sky that will have been built primarily for recreation.

It will have to be built outside the main regions of the Van Allen belts, and once placed in a nearly circular orbit out there, it will remain indefinitely circling Earth—for millions of years, if not struck by a sizable meteor.

Such a pleasure-satellite might have many of the ordinary pleasures of Earth and wine-women-and song there may be essentially the same as that trio down here.

It will also have pleasures that cannot possibly be duplicated on Earth—or even on the Moon. For instance, what about space-walking? For people who like the "wide, open spaces," what can possibly be more wide and more open than space itself? One could have a small reaction motor for maneuvering and one would have to be careful to remain in the satellite's shadow (or, preferably, to choose space-walking time when the satellite was in Earth's shadow).

Then, for those who like it, there may be nothing quite like a few hours spent in the awful emptiness and silence of the void, when a man can really be alone with his thoughts and when he can look at the Earth's swollen body, at the Moon's more distant shape, and at the quiet stars.

You might imagine that our space-walker can indulge in acrobatics, but if he does he will not be conscious of them. It will be the rest of the universe that will seem to jump about and he himself may merely become dizzy.

For acrobatics, I suggest another recreation that can probably be found only on our space-station. Why not a large empty cavernous room somewhere in the station, filled with air—possibly under pressure, to make it denser.

A man's arms can then be outfitted with "wings" for maneuvering and he can launch himself into space. The sensation of air about him will give him the feeling of movements he could not have had in empty space, and his wings will give him a personal control of his maneuvering far more delicate than would be possible by means of a reaction motor.

In short, he would be flying under his own power and, with sufficient practice, he could gain the proficiency of a bird on Earth. There would be others using the "fly-room" at the same time and a whole new spectrum of fun and games would become possible.

How about three-dimensional square-dancing? Why not have two couples do-si-do-ing at right angles to each other—one couple does it right-to-left-to-right; the other up-to-down-to-up. Would this not be "cube-dancing?"

But is nothing left for us Earth-lubbers down here? Are the new excitements to be found only in sea and space?

Not at all! The greatest new world of all lies within ourselves. There are mental recreations as well as physical ones.

Consider chess—an endlessly fascinating game which involves not the muscles but the mind. It is at present of

limited interest because only a few people have the temperament and ability to make worthwhile chess players.

That can also be said about baseball, yet baseball is popular because millions, who could not play except in the most amateurish fashion, are willing to spend hours upon hours in watching professionals. I understand there are people in the Soviet Union and elsewhere who will similarly stand and watch large chess-boards on which the moves of grand-master tournaments are displayed but this can never grow as popular a spectator sport as such games as baseball or soccer.

The trouble is that where ball games are fast and simple, chess is slow and subtle. But computers can play chess, too. Even as I write, a computer at Stanford University is playing another at the Institute of Experimental and Theoretical Physics in Moscow.

Computers are pretty poor chess players at present, but they will improve. Perhaps the day will come when computers will play chess at great speed and men will watch large reproductions of the swiftly changing patterns on chess-boards with interest and absorption. Great games can be repeated in "slow motion" and analyzed. We could become a nation of chess-watchers.

And why just chess? New games can be invented—deliberately complicated ones with tantalizing rules that would be far too difficult to serve as efficient recreation for men, but which could tickle the fancies of computers—three-dimensional chess, for one thing.

To be sure, computers can't play by themselves. They have to be programmed by men; the rules of the game must be fed into them together with a description of desirable courses of action. Computers may start as fifth-rate players indeed, but if they are programmed to modify their play in accord with experience, they can improve just as humans do. Computers may even become more proficient than any human being at some game in which they are designed to specialize.

We may eventually have a whole family of computer-games to serve mankind.

You might ask if this is indeed the sort of thing to which one ought to apply computers and programmers, and the answer is a clear and loud, "Yes!" In the first place, what is wrong with entertaining human beings? Man must be amused as well as fed, or in what way is he different from an ox?

Then, too, computer games will serve a purpose. We call them "games" but any decent game has an underlying order and pattern which, when properly studied, can serve as contributions to mathematics. To program a computer to play chess is a way of testing mathematical techniques that can then be applied to more serious problems. And programmers who whet their mathematical fangs on chess will find them all the sharper in other directions.

Horse-racing "improves the breed," they say. Game-programming will improve the breed of computer and programmers alike.

But even the computer is an artifact. What about man's mind itself?

It may even be that the actual powers of the human mind itself will be intensified (with or without any enhancement by mechanical device) so that men may finally learn to be telepaths. Some more so than others, of course.

Who can imagine what fun it might be to think to one another rather than to talk? What wonders of the human spirit may emerge when each individual is no longer imprisoned by a wall of flesh, but can commune directly with others?

It may be, in fact, that this is the ultimate pleasure and recreation, the purpose toward which all of intelligent life has been tending since the beginning. The delight of direct communion may be such as to sink all other pleasures to nothing.

It may even be that, just as I sit here now trying to imagine the pleasures of the future, some centuries hence another man may sit and try to reconstruct, in sorrow and sympathy, the miseries of a past in which billions of human beings wandered lonely, seeking in the wildest

physical and mental activities that pleasure which could only be obtained through the touch of the mental tendrils of a loved one.

* * *

It may be . . . but many things may be. I've tried to give some ideas of what the pleasures of tomorrow may be. In the following pages, my fellow compatriots examine other aspects of the future. For the future at present belongs to the realm of science fiction. And until the marvels of tomorrow actually arrive, we'll have to settle for a vicarious look at possible and probable futures.

Telepathy may be for the future; science fiction is for today.

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Sixty years ago, Hugo Gernsback coined the word *television* in his novel, *Ralph 124C41+*.

Forty years ago, the first experiments in the transmission of television pictures were carried out. There were less than fifty receiving sets in existence.

Thirty years ago, the first commercial broadcasts were made, during the New York World's Fair of 1939; programming was limited to two hours a day, and there were several thousand receivers in the New York area.

Twenty-two years ago, the first inter-city network was formed when stations in New York and Washington, D.C. were joined together.

1969 saw the first live transmission from the Moon!

From fictional conception to experiment to commercial realization took less than forty years; from coinage as a word to today less than the lifespan of a man. Hugo Gernsback died just a few years ago; he lived to see a world that depended on the living horse break into the age of space. Gernsback's novel, unreadable by today's standards, was a utopian story of the far future, several hundred years hence, when man's problems were solved through the miracle of science. Yet even in his wildest dreaming, he failed to realize the immediate effect science would have on his own century.

Still, even considering his failures in societal and gadgetry extrapolation, Gernsback opened a window to the future, encouraged a generation of readers to think beyond today and the possible, to tomorrow and the im-

probable. And this is the role that science fiction still plays today. In Gernsback's time, and during the next forty years, s-f was considered the poor relation of adventure fiction, the province of the wild-eyed and wooly-headed dreamer. Today, the genre has proven itself, and earned a place of respect. Tomorrow . . . no matter what the general view of it as genre: category, science fiction will still be the opener of the door to the future for another generation. And from that generation will come the men who will invent . . .

What strange and wondrous devices will they invent? I don't know. Possibly something that has already been described in a story of today, but now considered impossible.

Something as simple as television . . .

—*Robert Hoskins*

Robert Silverberg is a man of many talents: biographer, anthologist, novelist, popularizer of science . . . and author of some of the most compelling and disturbing science fiction being written today. Happily for we as readers, he is a man yet young enough that we can look forward to many years of producing stories such as . . .

THE PLEASURE OF OUR COMPANY

Robert Silverberg

He was the only man aboard the ship, one man inside a sleek shining cylinder heading away from Bradley's World at ten thousand miles a second, and yet he was far from alone. He had wife, father, daughter, son for company, and plenty of others: Ovid and Hemingway and Plato, Shakespeare and Goethe, Attila the Hun and Alexander the Great; a stack of fancy cubes to go with the family ones. And his old friend Juan was along, too, the man who had shared his dream, his utopian fantasy, Juan who had been with him at the beginning and almost until the end. He had a dozen fellow voyagers in all. He wouldn't be lonely, though he had three years of solitary travel ahead of him before he reached his landfall, his place of exile.

It was the third hour of his voyage. He was growing calm, now, after the frenzy of his escape. Aboard ship he had showered, changed, rested. The sweat and grime of that wild dash through the safety tunnel were gone now, though he wouldn't quickly shake from his mind the smell of that passageway, like rotting teeth, nor the memory of his terrifying fumbling with the security gate's copper arms as the junta's storm-troopers trotted toward him. But the gate had opened, and the ship had been there: he had escaped, and he was safe. He was safe.

I'll try some cubes, he thought.

The receptor slots in the control room held six cubes

at once. He picked six at random, slipped them into place, actuated the evoker. Then he went into the ship's garden. There were screens and speakers all over the ship.

The air was moist and sweet in the garden. A plump, toga-clad man, clean-shaven, big-nosed, blossomed on one screen and said, "What a lovely garden! How I adore plants! You must have a gift for making things grow."

"Everything grows by itself. You're—"

"Publius Ovidius Naso."

"Thomas Voigtland. Former President of the Citizens' Council on Bradley's World. Now President-in-exile, I guess. A coup d'etat by the military."

"My sympathies. Tragic, tragic!"

"I was lucky to escape alive. I may never be able to return. They've probably got a price on my head."

"I know how terrible it is to be sundered from your homeland. Were you able to bring your wife?"

"I'm over here," Lydia said. "Tom? Tom, introduce me to Mr. Naso."

"I didn't have time to bring her," Voigtland said. "But at least I took a cube of her with me."

Lydia was three screens down from Ovid, just above a clumb of glistening ferns. She looked glorious, her auburn hair a little too deep in tone but otherwise quite a convincing replica. He had cubed her two years before; her face showed none of the lines that the recent troubles had engraved on it. Voigtland said to her, "Not Mr. Naso, dear. Ovid. The poet Ovid."

"Of course. I'm sorry. How did you happen to choose him?"

"Because he's charming and civilized. And he understands what exile is like."

Ovid said softly, "Ten years by the Black Sea. Smelly barbarians my only companions. Yet one learns to adapt. My wife remained in Rome to manage my property and to intercede for me—"

"And mine remains on Bradley's World," said Voigtland. "Along with . . . along with—"

Lydia said, "What's this about exile, Tom? What happened?"

He began to explain about McAllister and the junta. He hadn't told her, back when he was having her cubed, why he wanted a cube of her. He had seen the coup coming. She hadn't.

As he spoke, a screen brightened between Ovid and Lydia and the seamed, leathery face of old Juan appeared. They had redrafted the constitution of Bradley's World together, twenty years earlier.

"It happened, then," Juan said instantly. "Well, we both knew it would. Did they kill very many?"

"I don't know. I got out fast once they started to . . ."
He faltered. "It was a perfectly executed coup. You're still there. I suppose you're organizing the underground resistance by now. And I . . . I . . ."

Needles of fire sprouted in his brain.

And I ran away, he said silently.

The other screens were alive now. On the fourth, someone with white robes, gentle eyes, dark curling hair. Voigland guessed him to be Plato. On the fifth, Shakespeare, instantly recognizable, for the cube-makers had modeled him after the First Folio portrait: high forehead, long hair, pursed quizzical lips. On the sixth, a fierce, demonic-looking little man. Attila the Hun? They were all talking, activating themselves at random, introducing themselves to one another and to him. Their voices danced along the top of his skull. He could not follow their words. Restless, he moved among the plants, touching their leaves, inhaling the perfume of their flowers.

Out of the chaos came Lydia's voice.

"Where are you heading now, Tom?"

"Rigel XIX. I'll wait out the revolution there. It was my only option once hell broke loose. Get in the ship and—"

"It's so far," she said. "You're traveling alone?"

"I have you, don't I? And Mark and Lynx, and Juan, and Dad, and all these others."



"Cubes, that's all."

"Cubes will have to do," Voigtland said. Suddenly the fragrance of the garden seemed to be choking him. He went out, into the viewing salon next door, where the black splendor of space glistened through a wide port. Screens were mounted opposite the window. Juan and Attila seemed to be getting along marvelously well; Plato and Ovid were bickering; Shakespeare brooded silently; Lydia, looking worried, stared out of her screen at him. He studied the sweep of the stars.

"Which is our world?" Lydia asked.

"This," he said.

"So small. So far away."

"I've only been traveling a few hours. It'll get smaller."

He hadn't had time to take anyone with him. The members of his family had been scattered all over the planet when the alarm came, not one of them within five hours of home--Lydia and Lynx holidaying in the South Polar Sea, Mark archaeologizing on the Westerland Plateau. The integrator net told him it was a Contingency C situation: get off planet within ninety minutes, or get ready to die. The forces of the junta had reached the capital and were on their way to pick him up. The escape ship had been ready, gathering dust in its buried vault. He hadn't been able to reach Juan. He hadn't been able to reach anybody. He used up sixty of his ninety minutes trying to get in touch with people, and then, with stunner shells already hissing overhead, he had gone into the ship and taken off. Alone.

But he had the cubes.

Cunning things. A whole personality encapsulated in a shimmering plastic box a couple of centimeters high. Over the past few years, as the likelihood of Contingency C had grown steadily greater, Voigtland had cubed everyone who was really close to him and stored the cubes aboard the escape ship, just in case.

It took an hour to get yourself cubed, and at the end

of it, they had your soul in the box, your motion habits, your speech patterns, your way of thinking, your entire package of standard reactions. Plug your cube into a receptor slot and you came to life on the screen, smiling as you would smile, moving as you would move, sounding as you would sound, saying things you would say. Of course, the thing on the screen was unreal, a computer-actuated mockup, but it was programmed to respond to conversation, to absorb new data and change its outlook in the light of what it learned, to generate questions without the need of previous inputs; in short, to behave as a real person would.

The cube-makers also could supply a cube of anyone who had ever lived, or, for that matter, any character of fiction. Why not? It wasn't necessary to draw a cube's program from a living subject. How hard was it to tabulate and synthesize a collection of responses, typical phrases, and attitudes, feed them into a cube, and call what came out Plato or Shakespeare or Attila? Of course, a custom-made synthesized cube of some historical figure ran high, because of the man-hours of research and programming involved, and a cube of someone's own departed great-aunt was even more costly, since there wasn't much chance that it could be used as a manufacturer's prototype for further sales. But there was a wide array of standard-model historicals in the catalog. When he was stocking his getaway ship, Voigtland had chosen eight of them.

Fellow voyagers. Companions on the long solitary journey into exile that he knew he might someday have to take. Great thinkers. Heroes and villains. He flattered himself that he was worthy of their company. He had picked a mix of personality types, to keep him from losing his mind on his trip. There wasn't another habitable planet within a light-year of Bradley's World. If he ever had to flee, he would have to flee *far*.

He walked from the viewing salon to the sleeping cabin, and from there to the galley, and on into the con-

trol room. The voices of his companions followed him from room to room. He paid little attention to what they were saying, but they didn't seem to mind. They were talking to each other: Lydia and Shakespeare, Ovid and Plato, Juan and Attila, like old friends at a cosmic cocktail party.

"—not for its own sake, no, but I'd say it's necessary to encourage mass killing and looting in order to keep your people from losing momentum, I guess, when—"

"—such a sad moment, when Prince Hal says he doesn't know Falstaff. I cry every time—"

"—when I said what I did about poets and musicians in an ideal Republic, it was not, I assure you, with the intent that *I* should have to live in such a Republic myself—"

"—the short sword, such as the Romans use, that's best, but—"

"—a throng of men and women in the brain, and one must let them find their freedom on the page—"

"—a slender young lad is fine, but yet I always had a leaning toward the ladies, you understand—"

"—massacre as a technique of political manipulation—"

"—Tom and I read your plays aloud to one another—"

"—good thick red wine, hardly watered—"

"—I loved Hamlet the dearest, my true son he was—"

"—the axe, ah, the axe! —"

Voigtland closed his throbbing eyes. He realized that it was too soon in his voyage for company, too soon, too soon. Only the first day of his escape, it was. He had lost his world in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye. He needed time to come to terms with that, time and solitude, while he examined his soul. Later he could talk to his fellow voyagers. Later he could play with his cubed playmates.

He began pulling the cubes from the slots: Attila first, then Plato, Ovid, Shakespeare. One by one the screens went dark. Juan winked at him as he vanished. Lydia dabbed at her eyes. Voigtland pulled her cube too.

When they were all gone, he felt as if he had killed them.

For three days he roamed the ship in silence. There was nothing for him to do except read, think, watch, eat, sleep, and try to relax. The ship was self-programmed and entirely homeostatic; it ran without need of him, and indeed he had no notion of how to operate it. He knew how to program a takeoff, a landing, and a change of course, and the ship did all the rest. Sometimes he spent hours in front of his viewing port, watching Bradley's World disappear into the maze of the heavens. Sometimes he took his cubes out and arranged them in little stacks, four stacks of three, then three stacks of four, then six of two. But he did not play any of them. Goethe and Plato and Lydia and Lynx and Mark remained silent. They were his opiates against loneliness; very well, he would wait until the loneliness became intolerable.

He considered starting to write his memoirs. He decided to let them wait a while, too, until time had given him a clearer perspective on his downfall.

He thought a great deal about what might be taking place on Bradley's World just now. The jailings, the kangaroo trials, the purges. Lydia in prison? His son and daughter? Juan? Were those whom he had left behind cursing him for a coward, running off to Rigel this way in his plush little escape vessel? Did you desert your planet, Voigtland? Did you run out?

No. No. No. No.

Better to live in exile than to join the glorious company of martyrs. This way you can send inspiring messages to the underground; you can serve as a symbol of resistance; you can go back someday and guide the oppressed fatherland toward freedom; you can lead the counter revolution and return to the capital with everybody cheering—can a martyr do any of that?

So he had saved himself. So he stayed alive to fight another day.

It sounded good. He was almost convinced.

He wanted desperately to know what was going on back there on Bradley's World, though.

The trouble with fleeing to another star system was

that it wasn't the same thing as fleeing to a mountaintop hideout or some remote island on your own world. It would take so long to get to the other system, so long to make the triumphant return. His ship was a pleasure cruiser, not really meant for big interstellar hops. It wasn't capable of heavy acceleration, and its top velocity, which it reached only after a buildup of many weeks, was less than .50 lights. If he went all the way to the Rigel system and headed right back home, six years would have elapsed on Bradley's World between his departure and his return. What would happen in those six years?

What was happening there now?

His ship had a tachyon-beam ultrawave communicator. He could reach with it any world within a sphere ten light-years in radius, in a matter of minutes. If he chose, he could call clear across the galaxy, right to the limits of man's expansion, and get an answer in less than an hour.

He could call Bradley's World and find out how all those he loved had fared in the first hours of the dictatorship.

If he did, though, he'd paint a tachyon trail like a blazing line across the cosmos. And they could track him and come after him in their ramjet fighters at .75 lights, and there was about one chance in three that they could locate him with only a single point-source coordinate, and overtake him, and pick him up. He didn't want to risk it: not yet, not while he was still this close to home.

But what if the junta had been crushed at the outset? What if the coup had failed? What if he spent the next three years foolishly fleeing toward Rigel, when all was well at home, and a single call could tell him that?

He stared at the ultrawave set. He nearly turned it on.

A thousand times during those three days he reached toward it, hesitated, halted.

Don't. Don't. They'll detect you and come after you.

But what if I don't need to keep running?

It was Contingency C. The cause was lost.

That's what our integrator net said. But machines can be wrong. Suppose our side managed to stay on top? I want to talk to Juan. I want to talk to Mark. I want to talk to Lydia.

That's why you brought the cubes along. Keep away from the ultrawave.

On the fourth day, he picked out six cubes and put them in the receptor slots.

Screens glowed. He saw his father, his son, his oldest friend. He also saw Hemingway, Goethe, Alexander the Great.

"I have to know what's happening at home," Voigtland said. "I want to call them."

"I'll tell you." It was Juan who spoke, the man who was closer to him than any brother. The old revolutionary, the student of conspiracies. "The junta is rounding up everyone who might have dangerous ideas and locking them away. It's telling everybody else not to worry: stability is here at last. McAllister is in full control, calling himself provisional president or something similar."

"Maybe not. Maybe it's safe for me to turn and go back."

"What happened?" Voigtland's son asked. His cube hadn't been activated before. He knew nothing of events since he had been cubed, ten months earlier. "Were you overthrown?"

Juan started to explain about the coup to Mark. Voigtland turned to his father. At least the old man was safe from the rebellious colonels; he had died two years ago, in his eighties, just after making the cube. The cube was all that was left of him. "I'm glad this didn't happen in your time," Voigtland said. "Do you remember, when I was a boy, and you were President of the Council, how you told me about the uprisings on other colonies? And I said, No. Bradley's is different, we all work together here."

The old man smiled. He looked pale and waxy, an echo

of the man he had been. "No world is different, Tom. Political entities go through similar cycles everywhere, and part of the cycle involves an impatience with democracy. I'm sorry that the impatience had to strike while you were in charge, son."

"Homer tells us that men would rather have their fill of sleep, love, singing, and dancing than of war," Goethe offered, smooth-voiced, courtly, civilized. "But there will always be some who love war above all else. Who can say why the gods gave us Achilles?"

"I can," Hemingway growled. "You define man by looking at the opposites inside him. Love and hate. War and peace. Kissing and killing. That's where his borders are. What's wrong with that? Every man's a bundle of opposites. So is every society. And sometimes the killers get the upper hand on the kissers. Besides, how do you know the fellows who overthrew you were so wrong?"

"Let me speak of Achilles," said Alexander, tossing his ringlets, holding his hands high. "I know him better than any of you, for I carry his spirit within me. And I tell you that warriors are best fit to rule, so long as they have wisdom as well as strength, for they have given their lives as pledges in return for the power they hold. Achilles—"

Voigtland was not interested in Achilles. To Juan he said, "I have to call. It's four days, now. I can't just sit in this ship and remain cut off."

"If you call, they're likely to catch you."

"I know that. But what if the coup failed?" Voigtland was trembling. He moved closer to the ultrawave set.

Mark said, "Dad, if the coup failed, Juan will be sending a ramjet to intercept you. They won't let you just ride all the way to Rigel for nothing."

Yes, Voigtland thought, dazed with relief. Yes, yes, of course. How simple. Why hadn't I thought of that?

"You hear that?" Juan asked. "You won't call?"

"I won't call," Voigtland promised.

The days passed. He played all twelve cubes, chatted

with Mark and Lynx, Lydia, Juan. Idle chatter, talk of old holidays, friends, growing up. He loved the sight of his cool elegant daughter and his rugged long-limbed son, and wondered how he could have sired them, he who was short and thick-bodied, with blunt features and massive bones. He talked with his father about government, with Juan about revolution. He talked with Ovid about exile, and with Plato about the nature of injustice, and with Hemingway about the definition of courage. They helped him through some of the difficult moments. Each day had its difficult moments.

The nights were much worse.

He ran screaming and ablaze down the tunnels of his own soul. He saw faces looming like huge white lamps above him. Men in black uniforms and mirror-bright boots paraded in somber phalanxes over his fallen body. Citizens lined up to jeer him. ENEMY OF THE STATE. ENEMY OF THE STATE. ENEMY OF THE STATE. They brought Juan to him in his dreams. COWARD. COWARD. COWARD. Juan's lean bony body was ridged and gouged; he had been put through the tortures, the wires in the skull, the lights in the eyes, the truncheons in the ribs. I STAYED. YOU FLED. I STAYED. YOU FLED. I STAYED. YOU FLED. They showed him his own face in a mirror, a jackal's face, with long yellow teeth and little twitching eyes. ARE YOU PROUD OF YOURSELF? ARE YOU PLEASED? ARE YOU HAPPY TO BE ALIVE?

He asked the ship for help. The ship wrapped him in a cradle of silvery fibers and slid snouts against his skin that filled his veins with cold droplets of unknown drugs. He slipped into a deeper sleep, and underneath the sleep, burrowing upward, came dragons and gorgons and serpents and basilisks, whispering mockery as he slept. TRAITOR. TRAITOR. TRAITOR. HOW CAN YOU HOPE TO SLEEP SOUNDLY, HAVING DONE WHAT YOU HAVE DONE?

"Look," he said to Lydia, "they would have killed me within the hour. There wasn't any possible way of find-

ing you, Mark, Juan, anybody. What sense was there in waiting longer?"

"No sense at all, Tom. You did the smartest thing."

"But was it the *right* thing, Lydia?"

Lynx said, "Father, you had no choice. It was run or die."

He wandered through the ship, making an unending circuit. How soft the walls were, how beautifully upholstered! The lighting was gentle. Restful images flowed and coalesced and transformed themselves on the sloping ceilings. The little garden was a vale of beauty. He had music, fine food, books, cubes. What was it like in the sewers of the underground now?

"We didn't need more martyrs," he told Plato. "The junta was making enough martyrs as it was. We needed leaders. What good is a dead leader?"

"Very wise, my friend. You have made yourself a symbol of heroism, distant, idealized, untouchable, while your colleagues carry on the struggle in your name," Plato said silkily. "And yet you are able to return and serve your people in the future. The service a martyr gives is limited, finite, locked to a single point in time. Eh?"

"I have to disagree," said Ovid. "If a man wants to be a hero, he ought to hold his ground and take what comes. Of course, what sane man wants to be a hero? You did well, friend Voigtland! Give yourself over to feasting and love, and live longer and more happily."

"You're mocking me," he said to Ovid,

"I do not mock. I console. I amuse. I do not mock."

In the night came tinkling sounds, faint bells, crystalline laughter. Figures capered through his brain, demons, jesters, witches, ghouls. He tumbled down into mustiness and decay, into a realm of spiders, where empty husks hung on vast arching webs. THIS IS WHERE THE HEROES GO. Hags embraced him. WELCOME TO VALHALLA. Gnarled midgets offered him horns of mead, and the mead was bitter, leaving a coating of ash on his lips. ALL HAIL. ALL HAIL. ALL HAIL.

"Help me," he said hoarsely to the cubes. "What did I bring you along for, if not to help me?"

"We're trying to help," Hemingway said. "We agree that you did the sensible thing."

"You're saying it to make me happy. You aren't sincere."

"You bastard! Call me a liar again and I'll step out of this screen and—"

"Maybe I can put it another way," Juan said craftily. "Tom, you had an *obligation* to save yourself. Saving yourself was the most valuable thing you could have done for the cause. Listen, for all you knew the rest of us had already been wiped out, right?"

"Yes. Yes!"

"Then what would you accomplish by staying and being wiped out too? Outside of some phony heroics, what?" Juan shook his head. "A leader in exile is better than a leader in the grave. You can direct the resistance from Rigel, if the rest of us are gone. Do you see the dynamics of it, Tom?"

"I see. I see. You make it sound so reasonable, Juan."

Juan winked. "We always understood each other."

He activated the cube of his father. "What do you say? Should I have stayed or gone?"

"Maybe stay, maybe go. How can I speak for you? Certainly taking the ship was more practical. Staying would have been more dramatic. Tom, Tom, how can I speak for you?"

"Mark?"

"I would have stayed and fought right to the end. Teeth, nails, everything. But that's me. I think maybe you did the right thing, Dad. The way Juan explains it. The right thing for *you*, that is."

Voigtland frowned. "Stop talking in circles. Just tell me this: do you despise me for going?"

"You know I don't," Mark said.

The cubes consoled him. He began to sleep more

soundly, after a while. He stopped fretting about the morality of his flight. He remembered how to relax.

He talked military tactics with Attila, and was surprised to find a complex human being behind the one-dimensional ferocity. He tried to discuss the nature of tragedy with Shakespeare, but Shakespeare seemed more interested in talking about taverns, politics, and the problems of a professional playwright's finances. He spoke to Goethe about the second part of *Faust*, asking if Goethe really felt that the highest kind of redemption came through governing well, and Goethe said, yes, yes, of course. And when Voigtland wearied of matching wits with his cubed great ones, he set them going against one another, Attila and Alexander, Shakespeare and Goethe, Hemingway and Plato, and sat back, listening to such talk as mortal man had never heard. And there were humbler sessions with Juan and his family. He blessed the cubes; he blessed their makers.

"You seem much happier these days," Lydia said.

"All that nasty guilt washed away," said Lynx.

"It was just a matter of looking at the logic of the situation," Juan observed.

Mark said, "And cutting out all the masochism, the self-flagellation."

"Wait a second," said Voigtland. "Let's not hit below the belt, young man."

"But it *was* masochism, Dad. Weren't you wallowing in your guilt? Admit it."

"I suppose I—"

"And looking to us to pull you out," Lynx said. "Which we did."

"Yes. You did."

"And it's all clear to you now, eh?" Juan asked. "Maybe you *thought* you were afraid, thought you were running out, but you were actually performing a service to the republic. Eh?"

Voigtland grinned. "Doing the right thing for the wrong reason."

"Exactly. Exactly."

"The important thing is the contribution you still can make to Bradley's World," his father's voice said. "You're still young. There's time to rebuild what we used to have there."

"Yes. Certainly."

"Instead of dying a futile but heroic death," said Juan.

"On the other hand," Lynx said, "what did Eliot write? *'The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.'*"

Voigtland frowned. "Are you trying to say—"

"And it is true," Mark cut in, "that you were planning your escape far in advance. I mean, making the cubes and all, picking out the famous men you wanted to take—"

"As though you had decided that at the first sign of trouble you were going to skip out," said Lynx.

"They've got a point," his father said. "Rational self-protection is one thing, but an excessive concern for your mode of safety in case of emergency is another."

"I don't say you should have stayed and died," Lydia said. "I never would say that. But all the same—"

"Hold on!" Voigtland said. The cubes were turning against him, suddenly. "What kind of talk is this?"

Juan said, "And strictly as a pragmatic point, if the people were to find out how far in advance you engineered your way out, and how comfortable you are as you head for exile—"

"You're supposed to help me!" Voigtland shouted. "Why are you starting this? What are you trying to do?"

"You know we all love you," said Lydia.

"We hate to see you not thinking clearly, Father," Lynx said.

"Weren't you planning to run out all along?" said Mark.

"Wait! Stop! Wait!"

"Strictly as a matter of—"

Voigtland rushed into the control room and pulled the Juan-cube from the slot.

"We're trying to explain to you, dear—"

He pulled the Lydia-cube, the Mark-cube, the Lynx-cube, the father-cube.

The ship was silent.

He crouched, gasping, sweat-soaked, face rigid, eyes clenched tight shut, waiting for the shouting in his skull to die away.

An hour later, when he was calm again, he began setting up his ultrawave call, tapping out the frequency that the underground would probably be using, if any underground existed. The tachyon-beam sprang across the void, an all but instantaneous carrier wave, and he heard cracklings, and then a guarded voice saying, "Four Nine Eight Three, we read your signal, do you read me? This is Four Nine Eight Three, come in, come in, who are you?"

"Voigtland," he said. "President Voigtland, calling Juan. Can you get Juan on the line?"

"Give me your numbers, and—"

"What numbers? This is *Voigtland*. I'm I don't know how many billion miles out in space, and I want to talk to Juan. Get me Juan. *Get me Juan.*"

"You wait," the voice said.

Voigtland waited, while the ultrawave spewed energy wantonly into the void. He heard clickings, scrapings, clatterings. "You still there?" the voice said, after a while. "We're patching him in. But be quick. He's busy."

"Well? Who is it?" Juan's voice, beyond doubt.

"Tom here. Tom Voigtland, Juan!"

"It's really you?" Coldly. From a billion parsecs away, from some other universe. "Enjoying your trip, Tom?"

"I had to call. To find out . . . to find out . . . how it was going, how everybody is. How's Mark . . . Lydia . . . you . . ."

"Mark's dead. Killed the second week, trying to blow up McAllister in a parade."

"Oh. Oh."

"Lydia and Lynx are in prison somewhere. Most of the others are dead. Maybe ten of us left, and they'll get us soon, too. Of course, there's you."

"Yes."

"You bastard," Juan said quietly. "You rotten bastard. All of us getting rounded up and shot, and you get into your ship and fly away!"

"They would have killed me too, Juan. They were coming after me. I only just made it."

"You should have stayed," Juan said.

"No. No. that isn't what you just said to me! You told me I did the right thing, that I'd serve as a symbol of resistance, inspiring everybody from my place of exile, a living symbol of the overthrown government—"

"I said this?"

"You, yes," Voigtland told him. "Your cube, anyway."

"Go to hell," said Juan. "You lunatic bastard."

"Your cube—we discussed it, you explained—"

"Are you crazy, Tom? Listen, those cubes are programmed to tell you whatever you want to hear. Don't you know that? You want to feel like a hero for running away, they tell you you're a hero. It's that simple. How can you sit there and quote what my cube said to you, and make me believe that *I* said it?"

"But I . . . you—"

"Have a nice flight, Tom. Give my love to everybody, wherever you're going."

"I couldn't just stay there to be killed. What good would it have been? Help me, Juan! What shall I do now? Help me!"

"I don't give a damn what you do," Juan said. "Ask your cubes for help. So long, Tom."

"Juan—"

"So long, you bastard."

Contact broke.

Voigtland sat quietly for a while, pressing his knuckles together. *Listen, those cubes are programmed to tell you whatever you want to hear. Don't you know that? You want to feel like a hero for running away, they tell you you're a hero. And if you want to feel like a villain? They tell you that too. They meet all needs. They aren't people. They're cubes.*

He put Goethe in the slot. "Tell me about martyrdom," he said.

Goethe said, "It has its tempting side. One may be covered with sins, scaly and rough-skinned with them, and in a single fiery moment of self-immolation one wins redemption and absolution, and one's name is forever cherished."

He put Juan in the slot. "Tell me about the symbolic impact of getting killed in the line of duty."

"It can transform a mediocre public official into a magnificent historical figure," Juan said.

He put Mark in the slot. "Which is a better father to have: a live coward or a dead hero?"

"Go down fighting, Dad."

He put Hemingway in the slot. "What would you do if someone called you a rotten bastard?"

"I'd stop to think if he was right or wrong. If he was wrong, I'd give him to the sharks. If he was right, well, maybe the sharks would get fed anyway."

He put Lydia in the slot. Lynx. His father. Alexander. Attila. Shakespeare. Plato. Ovid.

In their various ways they were all quite eloquent. They spoke of bravery, self-sacrifice, nobility, redemption.

He picked up the Mark-cube. "You're dead," he said. "Just like your grandfather. There isn't any Mark any more. What comes out of this cube isn't Mark. It's me, speaking with Mark's voice, talking through Mark's mind. You're just a dummy."

He put the Mark-cube in the ship's converter input, and it tumbled down the slideway to become reaction mass. He put the Lydia-cube in next. Lynx. His father. Alexander. Attila. Shakespeare. Plato. Ovid. Goethe.

He picked up the Juan-cube. He put it in a slot again. "Tell me the truth," he yelled. "What'll happen to me if I go back to Bradley's World?"

"You'll make your way safely to the underground and take charge, Tom. You'll help us throw McAllister out. We can win with you, Tom."

"Crap," Voigtland said. "I'll tell you what'll really hap-

pen. I'll be intercepted before I go into my landing orbit. I'll be taken down and put on trial. And then I'll be shot. Right? Right? Tell me the truth, for once. Tell me I'll be shot!"

"You misunderstand the dynamics of the situation, Tom. The impact of your return will be so great that—"

He took the Juan-cube from the slot and put it into the chute that went to the converter.

"Hello?" Voigtland said "Anyone here?"

The ship was silent.

"I'll miss all that scintillating conversation," he said. "I miss you already Yes. Yes. But I'm glad you're gone."

He countermanded the ship's navigational instructions and tapped out the program headed RETURN TO POINT OF DEPARTURE. His hands were shaking, just a little, but the message went through. The instruments showed him the change of course as the ship began to turn around. As it began to take him home.

Alone.

3 *Fables: One*

THE ABSOLUTE ULTIMATE INVENTION

Stephen Barr

A Scientist was proudly contemplating his latest creation when his mother came into the lab. "I've done it at last!" he said. It's the Secret of Eternal Youth—it reverses your age!"

"It does what, dear?"

"This machine reverses the order of the numbers in your age. You see, I'm just 41, and I was thinking that's the beginning of middle age, so I invented this thing. You sit in the seat and press the red button. It'll make me 14, see?"

His mother smiled. "Yes, you always worried about your age, even as a child: except that when you were a little boy you told all the little girls you were older than you were. I wouldn't do what you intend, if I were you."

"Nonsense!" he said gaily, and got into the seat.

"No, dear! Don't do it! We went along with the deception, and by the time you were grown up you . . ."

The Scientist shook his head, and before his mother could stop him, firmly pressed the red button.

". . . believed it, and the fact is," she went on, "you're two years younger than you think. Or, rather, thought."

It is not our intention to present reprints in this series, but Infinity One is the lineal descendent of Infinity Science Fiction of fond memory. And leading off the first issue of that first Infinity was a story destined to become an immediate classic. Thus it's a pleasure to break our own rules for the first and only time and present once more . . .

THE STAR

Arthur C. Clarke

It is three thousand light-years to the Vatican. Once, I believed that space could have no power over faith, just as I believed that the heavens declared the glory of God's handiwork. Now I have seen that handiwork, and my faith is sorely troubled. I stare at the crucifix that hangs on the cabin wall above the Mark VI Computer, and for the first time in my life I wonder if it is no more than an empty symbol.

I have told no one yet, but the truth cannot be concealed. The facts are there for all to read, recorded on the countless miles of magnetic tape and the thousands of photographs we are carrying back to Earth. Other scientists can interpret them as easily as I can, and I am not one who would condone that tampering with the truth which often gave my order a bad name in the olden days.

The crew are already sufficiently depressed: I wonder how they will take this ultimate irony. Few of them have any religious faith, yet they will not relish using this final weapon in their campaign against me—that private, good-natured, but fundamentally serious, war which lasted all the way from Earth. It amused them to have a Jesuit as chief astrophysicist: Dr. Chandler, for instance, could never get over it (why are medical men such notorious atheists?). Sometimes he would meet me on the observation deck, where the lights are always low so that the stars shine with undiminished glory. He would come up

to me in the gloom and stand staring out of the great oval port, while the heavens crawled slowly around us as the ship turned end over end with the residual spin we had never bothered to correct.

"Well, Father," he would say at last, "it goes on forever and forever, and perhaps *Something* made it. But how you can believe that *Something* has a special interest in us and our miserable little world—that just beats me." Then the argument would start, while the stars and nebulae would swing around us in silent, endless arcs beyond the flawlessly clear plastic of the observation port.

It was, I think, the apparent incongruity of my position that caused most amusement to the crew. In vain I would point to my three papers in the *Astrophysical Journal*, my five in the *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*. I would remind them that my order has long been famous for its scientific works. We may be few now, but ever since the eighteenth century we have made contributions to astronomy and geophysics out of all proportion to our numbers. Will my report on the Phoenix Nebula end our thousand years of history? It will end, I fear, much more than that.

I do not know who gave the nebula its name, which seems to me a very bad one. If it contains a prophecy, it is one that cannot be verified for several billion years. Even the word nebula is misleading: this is a far smaller object than those stupendous clouds of mist—the stuff of unborn stars—that are scattered throughout the length of the Milky Way. On the cosmic scale, indeed, the Phoenix Nebula is a tiny thing—a tenuous shell of gas surrounding a single star.

Or what is left of a star . . .

The Rubens engraving of Loyola seems to mock me as it hangs there above the spectrophotometer tracings. What would *you*, Father, have made of this knowledge that has come into my keeping, so far from the little world that was all the universe you knew? Would your faith have risen to the challenge, as mine has failed to do?

You gaze into the distance, Father, but I have traveled a distance beyond any that you could have imagined when you founded our order a thousand years ago. No other survey ship has been so far from Earth: we are at the very frontiers of the explored universe. We set out to reach the Phoenix Nebula, we succeeded, and we are homeward bound with our burden of knowledge. I wish I could lift that burden from my shoulders, but I call to you in vain across the centuries and the light-years that lie between us.

On the book you are holding the words are plain to read. AD MAIOREM DEI GLORIAM, the message runs, but it is a message I can no longer believe. Would you still believe it, if you could see what we have found?

We knew, of course, what the Phoenix Nebula was. Every year, in our galaxy alone, more than a hundred stars explode, blazing for a few hours or days with thousands of times their normal brilliance before they sink back into death and obscurity. Such are the ordinary novae—the commonplace disasters of the universe. I have recorded the spectrograms and light curves of dozens since I started working at the Lunar Observatory.

But three or four times in every thousand years occurs something beside which even a nova pales into total insignificance.

When a star becomes a *supernova*, it may for a little while outshine all the massed suns of the galaxy. The Chinese astronomers watched this happen in A.D. 1054, not knowing what it was they saw. Five centuries later, in 1572, a supernova blazed in Cassiopeia so brilliantly that it was visible in the daylight sky. There have been three more in the thousand years that have passed since then.

Our mission was to visit the remnants of such a catastrophe, to reconstruct the events that led up to it, and, if possible, to learn its cause. We came slowly in through the concentric shells of gas that had been blasted out six thousand years before, yet were expanding still. They were immensely hot, radiating even now with a fierce

violet light, but were far too tenuous to do us any damage. When the star had exploded, its outer layers had been driven upward with such speed that they had escaped completely from its gravitational field. Now they formed a hollow shell large enough to engulf a thousand solar systems, and at its center burned the tiny, fantastic object which the star had now become—a White Dwarf, smaller than the Earth, yet weighing a million times as much.

The glowing gas shells were all around us, banishing the normal night of interstellar space. We were flying into the center of a cosmic bomb that had detonated millennia ago and whose incandescent fragments were still hurtling apart. The immense scale of the explosion, and the fact that the debris already covered a volume of space many billions of miles across, robbed the scene of any visible movement. It would take decades before the unaided eye could detect any motion in these tortured wisps and eddies of gas, yet the sense of turbulent expansion was overwhelming.

We had checked our primary drive hours before, and were drifting slowly toward the fierce little star ahead. Once it had been a sun like our own, but it had squandered in a few hours the energy that should have kept it shining for a million years. Now it was a shrunken miser, hoarding its resources as if trying to make amends for its prodigal youth.

No one seriously expected to find planets. If there had been any before the explosion, they would have been boiled into puffs of vapor, and their substance lost in the greater wreckage of the star itself. But we made the automatic search, as we always do when approaching an unknown sun, and presently we found a single small world circling the star at an immense distance. It must have been the Pluto of this vanished solar system, orbiting on the frontiers of the night. Too far from the central sun ever to have known life, its remoteness had saved it from the fate of all its lost companions.

The passing fires had seared its rocks and burned away

the mantle of frozen gas that must have covered it in the days before the disaster. We landed, and we found the Vault.

Its builders had made sure that we should. The monolithic marker that stood above the entrance was now a fused stump, but even the first long-range photographs told us that here was the work of intelligence. A little later we detected the continent-wide pattern of radioactivity that had been buried in the rock. Even if the pylon above the Vault had been destroyed, this would have remained, an immovable and all but eternal beacon calling to the stars. Our ship fell toward this gigantic bull's-eye like an arrow into its target.

The pylon must have been a mile high when it was built, but now it looked like a candle that had melted down into a puddle of wax. It took us a week to drill through the fused rock, since we did not have the proper tools for a task like this. We were astronomers, not archaeologists, but we could improvise. Our original purpose was forgotten: this lonely monument, reared with such labor at the greatest possible distance from the doomed sun, could have only one meaning. A civilization that knew it was about to die had made its last bid for immortality.

It will take us generations to examine all the treasures that were placed in the Vault. They had plenty of time to prepare, for their sun must have given its first warnings many years before the final detonation. Everything that they wished to preserve, all the fruit of their genius, they brought here to this distant world in the days before the end, hoping that some other race would find it and that they would not be utterly forgotten. Would we have done as well, or would we have been too lost in our own misery to give thought to a future we could never see or share?

If only they had had a little more time! They could travel freely enough between the planets of their own sun, but they had not yet learned to cross the interstellar gulfs, and the nearest solar system was a hundred light-

years away. Yet even had they possessed the secret of the Transfinite Drive, no more than a few millions could have been saved. Perhaps it was better thus.

Even if they had not been so disturbingly human as their sculpture shows, we could not have helped admiring them and grieving for their fate. They left thousands of visual records and machines for projecting them, together with elaborate pictorial instructions from which it will not be difficult to learn their written language. We have examined many of these records, and brought to life for the first time in six thousand years the warmth and beauty of a civilization that in many ways must have been superior to our own. Perhaps they only showed us the best, and one can hardly blame them. But their worlds were very lovely, and their cities were built with a grace that matches anything of man's. We have watched them at work and play, and listened to their musical speech sounding across the centuries. One scene is still before my eyes—a group of children on a beach of strange blue sand, playing in the waves as children play on Earth. Curious whiplike trees line the shore, and some very large animal is wading in the shadows yet attracting no attention at all.

And sinking into the sea, still warm and friendly and lifegiving, is the sun that will soon turn traitor and obliterate all this innocent happiness.

Perhaps if we had not been so far from home and so vulnerable to loneliness, we should not have been so deeply moved. Many of us had seen the ruins of ancient civilizations on other worlds, but they had never affected us so profoundly. This tragedy was unique. It is one thing for a race to fail and die, as nations and cultures have done on Earth. But to be destroyed so completely in the full flower of its achievement, leaving no survivors—how could that be reconciled with the mercy of God,

My colleagues have asked me that, and I have given what answers I can. Perhaps you could have done better, Father Loyola, but I have found nothing in the *Exercitia Spiritualia* that helps me here. They were not an evil people: I do not know what gods they worshiped, if indeed

they worshiped any. But I have looked back at them across the centuries, and have watched while the loveliness they used their last strength to preserve was brought forth again into the light of their shrunken sun. They could have taught us much: why were they destroyed?

I know the answers that my colleagues will give when they get back to Earth. They will say that the universe has no purpose and no plan, that since a hundred suns explode every year in our galaxy, at this very moment some race is dying in the depths of space. Whether that race has done good or evil during its lifetime will make no difference in the end: there is no divine justice, for there is no God.

Yet, of course, what we have seen proves nothing of the sort. Anyone who argues thus is being swayed by emotion, not logic. God has no need to justify His actions to man. He who built the universe can destroy it when He chooses. It is arrogance—it is perilously near blasphemy—for us to say what He may or may not do.

This I could have accepted, hard though it is to look upon whole worlds and peoples thrown into the furnace. But there comes a point when even the deepest faith must falter, and now, as I look at the calculations lying before me, I know I have reached that point at last.

We could not tell, before we reached the nebula, how long ago the explosion took place. Now, from the astronomical evidence and the record in the rocks of that one surviving planet, I have been able to date it very exactly. I know in what year the light of this colossal conflagration reached our Earth. I know how brilliantly the supernova whose corpse now dwindles behind our speeding ship once shone in terrestrial skies. I know how it must have blazed low in the east before sunrise, like a beacon in that oriental dawn.

There can be no reasonable doubt: the ancient mystery is solved at last. Yet, oh God, there were so many stars you could have used. What was the need to give these people to the fire, that the symbol of their passing might shine above Bethlehem?

*We live in a big universe; Katherine McLean, who writes
far too little these days, examines one small corner of it
now...*

ECHO

Katherine MacLean

They began to know he was landing.

For uncounted seasons there had been only plants, and the sameness, the susurrus of wind, the drumming pressures of rain, the cold of snow, and the deep baking sunshine of the hot season, always no sound except the rumble of summer thunder in the ground, and the silver shimmering vibration of running streams.

Then suddenly they were somewhere strange and new, a different being, looking with its eyes, surrounded by metal echoing walls, moving in a heavy unfamiliar body, looking out of odd uncave openings.

There was no way to understand. Then the thoughts were gone, and they did not understand what it had been. Wind blew quietly across the grass, across the planet. They bent, and straightened, unfolded leaves, pushed roots a little further through the damp earth.

Suddenly again, the Thing, its feelings louder. The heavy self-body that could move by wishing, looking out through a hole at something. The hole not a hole, something else, understood by the being and understood in the flash, the understanding incomprehensible and forgotten when the connection ended.

It had ended; they were aware only of themselves again. What to do—Nothing: the hole memory was confused, forgotten, for it answered no questions. Remembering became: the belt of warmth drifting (as it

always had) across the world—days longer and hotter where it drifted, snow melting from hillsides, groundwater rising to thirsty roots, brown floodwater rising along streams and rivers, a different flavor of water . . .

Suddenly again not themselves, not aware of water, but feeling only as the Being, moving a weighty body: stop and start: the sound of motions echoing back from metal walls again. Fear and thought growing louder, louder—

They all knew when he landed.

It was a wind shriek, a spinning. Terror. A flash of pain—

It had been too loud, too possessing. When it stopped it left a feeling like deep silence. Across the world all feeling was blank and bleached. On the high slopes, things like pines felt the drumming of rain as faint and unimportant.

Should the small plants of the foothills put out buds, expecting the groundwater to reach and feed them? Memory came from the western continent, on the other side of the world. *On the foothills and plains in the wet season we budded; the rains were short; they stopped and dry winds came, and the buds and shoots died, and branches dried and cracked.* The massed memory was weaker than earlier memories, for many lives were missing and produced no memory. Memory of drying and its pain was felt at the tips of growing shoots, and slowed the growth of the soft green. Doubt. The cloud pattern, the night cold, the warm wind, and the pressure of snow blankets still over the bushes of high cold slopes . . . would it be safe to grow, expecting water?

A crash of sensation. Wrong, unplanted sensation! All the world became the feeling of being in a heavy body pressing on smooth surfaces, pressure against the face. Bells! loud, ringing alarm bells.

Fear and effort, quickly down the ladder, moving too fast, (unrooted!) falling. Pain—pain, blinding sunlight, sharp-focus violet shadows, green underfoot, odd smell of air—move faster!

Plants were blinded and confused by the wave of intensity. Forest fire? Blinding broken sensation, hot but no, not fire, broken stem, and the effort to move *from dry-earth toward water-safety?* effort *stretching tendrils, extending vine*, to start and stop *the inert self in sudden growth* across the grass. No, not growth, roots do not remain rooted or stay behind; all-self moves together with a heavy thudding swing like wind: gusting and swaying branches in a storm; AND pain, brokenness coming through into them, a wave of the same message striking outward with every thudding step. Broken, broken.

The world of plants writhed with his pain, the grating conviction of being broken. Suddenly there was a flare of light across the grassland, a vast metallic crash, and the man pitched forward on his face, cradling his head protectively in his arms. The pain and brightness turned dark and vanished.

The whispery, almost silent voices of the plants conferred, barely able to share each other's unobtrusive responses and memories after the blare of the new being's experiences.

"It died."

"It died."

"We are glad it died. Its living hurt."

"It should have died sooner."

"We once hurt with the pain of a place scorched by fire. The scorched plants hurt us. We thought of drying and a dry wind, of closing and not growing . . . when we thought to them, and they dried and were silent. Then we did not feel their pain. It was gone."

"Did we do that again?"

"Did we think *dry* and make the loud thing stop?"

"When we do not feel sick things, we feel only health and growing, the rain and sun and sweet taste of air frothing in the juice."

The man began to awake. Darkness and the pressure of ground against his length, the pressure of ground and grass against his face.

"Don't return," the plants thought, willing strongly together. "Stay dark." And they feared together the return of pain.

"Darkness," thought the man. "Sleep, avoid returning to pain." He sank back into nothingness and nonbroadcast.

The plants felt pleasure and health, and the warm comfort of spring winds, and the new reassurance of silence.

Suddenly the man awoke, an explosion of thought. *Don't need sleep. Must splint my arm. Must signal for help. Pain pain!* coming in intense waves, mastered and made unimportant by the decision to act.

"Pain," thought the plant world, deciding. "Pain will be ended by making dryness, non-growth, death. Death ends pain." Pain reached around the world in surges, throbbing, flowing into the channels of that thought, making it huge and powerful, making memory of how to think pain into death into huge amplified images. The hysterical thought-voice of the plant world screamed: "*Die! You hurt. Die!*"

"*Die!*" screamed the bushes. "*Die, wither, whiten, let your sap not rise to your twigs. Dry up, cease to know and feel.*"

"*Die,*" screamed the flowers. "*You are hurting us with your broken stem!*"

The man lifted his eyes from fastening a telescope splint to his wrist.

"*Die!*" silently screamed the grass, waving hatefully in the wind. "*Whither! Cease to feel! Stop hurting!*"

"Going crazy," muttered the man. "I hate that—what is it?—grass? How can I hate grass?"

His shoulder was already circled by the loop at the other end of the splint. Sitting, the man bent both legs, set a boot against the hook at the end of the wrist splint, and pushed outward, stretching the arm until the bones slipped back into a straight line as if they were unbroken. The splint clicked and remained at its stretched length

as his boot slipped out of the hook. He fell back against the grass and looked at the sky. He did not faint, but the waves of pain oddly surged and changed into hate and a great decision to act, to do something about his pain.

Do what? Something alive was making this pain, he must make the thing stop. Crazy thought—a broken arm was just a broken arm—no *thing* could . . .

Pain wiped out the thought. The plain seemed still to heave like a rolling surf, but he staggered to his feet and glared defiantly around in a circle.

"*Die!*" screamed the grass.

"*Die!*" screamed the flowers.

"Die—death," remembered bushes and trees. "Drought . . . broken branches . . . forest fires."

"Strange idea," muttered the man "Hate that grass. Hate that forest over there. Wish it would burn up. Hate this whole planet. Making my arm hurt. Looking at them makes my arm hurt."

He put his good hand over his eyes, shutting out the view. "Must stay rational. Can't go crazy. Must signal for help. They'll rescue me soon."

Concentrating, he searched inside himself for rationality, for philosophy, for calm and peace.

"*Yes—peace and silence—we want it!*" screamed the flowers. "*Die, hateful brother, and there will be peace.*"

"Die. Kill." When the man lifted his head and looked around, his eyes were despairing and mad. He pulled out a laser pistol clumsily with his good hand, set it to WIDE and pointed it at the nearest grass.

"*Wither,*" screamed the grass. "*Stop hurting sentience with your broken stem.*"

"Die," muttered the man. He pressed the trigger and a spray of fire took the grass. "Stop hurting my arm," he muttered. He spun and burned a swath across the grassy growths on the other side and walked onto the black charred ground while it still smoked.

"That'll show you, you rats," he said, swaying drunkenly.

"Hurt, stop, hurt. Die. Stop," screamed the planet of

plants. And, slowly aroused and awake, the deep and ancient things like pines added their memories of the death of trees. "Fire . . . avalanche . . . lightning . . . thirst . . ." they remembered in slow thunder across the mothlike thoughts of the smaller plants.

The man swayed under the impact. He took another step toward the distant forest, widened the setting of the laser pistol still further and held the trigger down.

When the rescue ship arrived they traced him easily by the black trail across the green new world, and the red and smoky forest fires rolling away from his black highway of ashes.

They set the ship down in the char, and manhandled him aboard. Once they had him under heavy sedation, plant-thoughts came through again: *die . . . stop . . . hurt . . .*

He pounded his image in the mirror until the sap ran from his wrists and jugular, quite a lot of it, and the plant-thoughts stilled.

Anne McCaffrey is a career woman; her occupation: housewife. Science fiction readers should band together to keep her happily married, so that she'll still manage to find time to produce such stories as the novel, Dragon-rider, and the following . . .

THE GREAT CANINE CHORUS

Anne McCaffrey

Pete Roberts of the Wilmington, Delaware K-9 Corps has as his partner a German shepherd named Wizard. One night, just after they took the beat, Wizard started acting itchy, nervous, whining. He was snappish, not like himself at all. He kept trying to pull Pete towards 7th Street.

That wasn't the beat, as Wiz well knew. But Pete decided there might be a good reason. Wizard was a canny dog; he could pick a culprit out of a crowd by the smell of fear the man exuded. And he'd saved Pete from two muggings already this year. So, protesting, Pete let Wizard lead him to that block of buildings being torn down in the urban renewal program.

Wizard became more and more impatient with Pete's apprehensive, measured pace and tried to tug him into a jog. Pete began to feel worried; kind of sickly scared. Suddenly the dog mounted the worn staircase of one of the buildings about to be demolished. He pawed at the door, whining.

Who's that? a voice asked, high and quavering like an old lady's. *Pa?* It couldn't be too old a female, then.

Wizard barked sharply three times in the negative signal he'd been taught.

Hi, dog. Do you see my Pa?

Wiz got down from the steps, looked up and down the street, then barked again three times.

Pa's so late, and I'm so hungry, the voice said.

Pete, who had eaten well an hour earlier, was suddenly overwhelmed with hunger—the sullen kind of stomach cramp that he'd experienced in Korea when his unit was cut off for four days. The kind of griping pangs you get when you're hungry all the time.

"Lady, I'm going down to the deli on the corner. I'll be right back with something to tide you over till your Pa gets back." Pete made the announcement before he realized it. He left Wizard on guard at the door.

He ordered a sub with no onions (somehow he knew 'no onions'), two cokes and a banana.

I'm in the back room, said the voice when he and Wizard entered the hall.

Pete had had the distinct impression the voice had come from the front of the building. The tone was too thin to have carried far.

The stench of the filthy hall sickened Pete. No matter how many years he might spend on the force, he'd never get used to the odor of poverty. Maybe it was the stink that brought a growl from Wizard.

Pete pushed open the back door and entered the pitifully furnished room. On an old armchair by the window was a wasted little figure, like a broken doll thrown down by a careless child, limbs askew. By now he expected a girl, a child, but this was such a *little* girl!

Wizard got down on his belly, licking his lips nervously. He crawled carefully across the dirty floor. He sniffed at the tiny hand on the shabby arm of the chair, whined softly. The little hand did not move away, nor toward him, either.

What kind of a father, Pete fumed to himself, would leave a kid, a mere baby, alone in a place like this?

I'm no baby, mister. I'm nine years old, she informed him indignantly.

Pete apologized contritely, blaming his error on the glare from the single window. He wouldn't have thought her more than five, six at the outside. She was so pitifully

underdeveloped. She was clean as were her shred of a dress and the old blanket on which she lay, but the rest of the room was filthy. Her pinched face had a curious, calm beauty to it. When Pete knelt beside her, he saw her eyes were filmed and sightless. And when she spoke, her mouth did not move.

He found himself breaking off small pieces of the sub and feeding them to her. She sipped the Coke through the straw and a look of intense pleasure crossed her face.

I knew I remembered how wonderful it tasted, she said. But not with her lips.

The truth dawned on Pete: this child was a telepath. Impossible?—he hadn't actually believed any of that crap. But there was no other explanation.

"You aren't talking," he said. "You don't make a sound."

I am too talking, answered the child soundlessly. *And you're answering.*

Pete gulped, hastily trying to mend matters. "You just don't speak the usual way."

I do everything kind of different. At least my Pa's always complaining I do. Her head turned slowly towards him. *You don't suppose something's happened to Pa, do you? I can't hear very far away when I'm hungry.*

Pete fed her another bite guiltily. "When did you eat last?"

Pa was home this morning. But all we had was bread.

Pete vowed to himself passionately that he was going to see Welfare immediately.

Oh, you mustn't! pleaded the soundless voice. Wizard, ears flattened, growling menacingly at Pete. She was clearly frightened of Welfare. *They'd take me away, like they took my sister, and put me in a barred place and I'd neve hear any birds or see Pa. They might cut me up 'cause my body doesn't work right.* She still spoke without sound.

"Aw, honey . . ."

My name's Maria, not honey.

"Maria, you've got it all wrong. Wizard, you tell her. Welfare helps people. You'd have a clean bed and birds right outside the window."

It'd be a hospital. My Ma died in a hospital because no one cared. Pa said so. They just let her die.

Wizard whimpered. Pete was frightened himself. He soothed Maria as best he could with promises of no hospitals, no cutting, plenty of birds. What she didn't finish of the sandwich, he wrapped it up and put beside her. He started to peel the banana for her but she refused it.

It's a treat for Wiz for bringing you here. She laughed. *He listens to people.*

Pete grinned.

"How on earth did you know that fool dog loves bananas?"

Nothing could have been funnier to Maria and her laughter was so contagious Pete grinned foolishly. Even Wizard laughed in his canine way, his tongue lolling out of one side of his mouth. Suddenly the atmosphere changed.

I hear Pa coming. You'd better leave. He wouldn't like having the fuzz in here.

"Then why did you let me in?"

Wizard. Dogs always know. I talk to dogs all the time. But I've never talked to one as smart as Wizard before. You get out now. Quick.

Pete felt a violent compulsion to take to his heels. Once they were around the corner the impulse vanished, so he waited a few moments and then peered around the building. He saw a shambling figure go into the house where they had found Maria.

Pete was shaken by his encounter with the girl: shaken, confused and frightened. She had taken him over, used him to suit her needs and then cut him off in fear when all he wanted to do was help her. He worried about her all the way round to the hospital: her pitiful life in those awful surroundings . . . and that strange talent.

He had a friend, a drinking buddy, who was interning at Delaware Hospital. Pete came in that night and found

Joe Lavelle on duty in the emergency ward, so he told Joe a little about the girl. "And what's going to become of her, living like that?"

"I'd say she was dead already and didn't know it," Joe snorted.

The thought of Maria dead choked Pete up. Her fragile laugh, her curious calm beauty gone? No!

"Hey, Pete!" The interne watched the cop's gut reaction with amazement. "I was only kidding. Why, I couldn't even guess what was wrong with her without an examination. She could have had polio, meningitis, m. s., any variety of paralysis. But I'd say she needed treatment, fast. And I'd certainly like to see this kid who can make any stalwart defender of this one-horse town quake in his boots like that."

Pete growled and Wizard seconded it.

Joe warded off an imaginary attack with his arm, laughing, just as the phone rang for him. Pete resumed his patrol.

The next morning, resolved to help Maria in spite of herself, he bought a frilly dress, bundled it and food and Wizard into his car and went back to the house. He 'called' to let her know he was coming.

There was no answer. The back room was deserted. Except for the de-stuffed armchair by the window and two Coke bottles on the floor under it, Pete could have sworn no one had been in the house for months.

"Find Maria, Wiz," Pete ordered.

Wizard hunted around, sniffing, and with a yelp raced out the door. He sniffed around outside and seemed to find a trace. Pete followed him in the car. Wizard acted just as if he knew exactly where he was going. He got half way down the next block then stopped as though he had run into an invisible wall. He lay down on the sidewalk, put his head on his paws and whined. Then he slunk back to Pete at the curb.

"Find her, Wizard!" Pete commanded. The dog crouched down and laid his ears back. It was the first time he had ever disobeyed that tone of voice.

"Maria! We're your friends! We want to help!" Pete shouted, oblivious to stares. He was sure she could hear him. He waited, apprehensive, unsure.

No! came the one disembodied word, filling his skull til his head rang. There was no arguing it.

"At least tell Wiz if you're hungry, Maria. He can bring you food. I promise I won't follow."

Twice in the next three weeks, Wizard darted into a deli, whining pathetically. It took Pete a minute or so the first time to grasp what the big dog wanted. Then he'd get a sandwich and a Coke-to-go, put it in a bag, roll the top into a handle for Wiz to carry. Then he'd wait til the dog returned. He was determined to prove to Maria he'd keep his promise. He didn't want to lose contact with her.

In the meantime he did a little judicious research on telepathy at the library, but the textbooks were too much for him. When he asked the librarian for something a guy could understand, he was shown the science fiction shelves.

Maria didn't act like fictional telepaths. According to the stories she should be able to get food when she wanted it, commit robberies undetected, start fires, transport herself and anyone else anywhere, aid society and perform minor miracles. Like heal herself, even. The prospects were magnificently endless. Yet she was stuck in some hideous, hot, horrible back room, half-starved and slowly dying of neglect.

The one thing Pete had to accept was the fact that Maria kept in touch with Wizard but excluded him. Since Pete considered Wizard every bit as smart as most men, he wasn't offended; but he felt powerless to help her as only a human could.

The next set of inexplicable incidents began about four weeks after Pete and Wizard first encountered the girl. They were pacing the beat on the hotel side of Rodney Square when the dog got restless. He strained against the leash until Pete let him go to see where he'd head. At a

dead run, Wizard streaked down Eleventh Street, right over into Harry West's beat.

Harry walked with Pirate, the biggest dog on the force. Pete couldn't figure Harry in trouble. He was wrong.

He heard the sullen rumble of an angry crowd by the time he reached French. Wiz was already around that corner and in the middle of a fight. Pete whistled for squad cars as he broke into the edge of the crowd, swinging his nightstick. He could hear Wizard growling angrily. He heard a yelp and then the growling of a second dog. He stumbled over Harry, bleeding from a head wound. Pete got Harry clear of the stampede just as the squad cars arrived.

Both dogs were at work, snapping, snarling, darting around and the crowd thinned rapidly. In a matter of minutes, all but the bitten, bruised and brained had evaporated into the hot night.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Harry demanded as he came to. "I heard Wiz just as some kook pelted me with a bottle."

"Well, Wizard just took off," was Pete's unenlightening reply.

"Glad he did. We came down on a Code One call but when Pirate and I got to the edge of the mob to get them moving, they closed in like we was Christmas in July. Somebody got Pirate in the head and I couldn't turn anywhere without getting it." Harry dabbed at the cuts on his hands. "I'd sure like to know what set them off."

Wizard and the bigger dog were wandering around the street, nervously sniffing. The paddy wagon arrived and Wiz and Pirate assisted in rounding up the incidentals, just begging for one legal bite. Then they started whiffling around again.

"What's with the dogs?" Harry asked as Pete helped him into a car. "Look at old Wiz pumping."

Wizard's tail was wagging like he was on the way to his best girl.

"Maria!" Pete gasped and called Wizard to heel. The

dog came bounding over, wriggling with delight. "Find Maria!" but Wizard barked three times, sneezed and shook his head. Pirate came up, nuzzled Harry, sniffed Wizard and then *he* barked three times.

"I got a girl that only talks to dogs yet," Pete said in bitter disgust.

Back on their own beat, Pete tried to figure out why Maria would have called Wizard. Harry and Pirate weren't in trouble at the time Wiz took off. Maria must have been worried . . . yeah, that was it! Worried about her old man! She'd called Wizard because her old man had been in that crowd.

And that explained why Wizard was so happy-acting. He'd found Maria's father's trail leading away from the rumble.

Pete left a note for Harry to keep an ear and an eye open for any crippled kids on his beat and to let him know if Pirate ever acted . . . strange. She might keep in touch with Pirate, too, since the big dog had been involved in getting her father out of a tough scrape.

Two of the men picked up that day were known numbers runners. They stuck to their story that the cop had come busting in where he wasn't needed and his damn dog had spooked the crowd into the rumble. They just 'happened' to be there.

For the next few weeks Pete got no signs from Wizard that Maria was in distress. This bothered him almost as much as hearing from her when she *was* hungry. At headquarters they were hearing nasty rumors about a new numbers racket. Certain hoods were being seen in new cars, in new quarters, acting raunchy. Two runners were picked up on suspicion, in the hope of cracking them. They had to be released twenty-four hours later, clean, but one of them had bragged a little. Pete heard one of the detective lieutenants complaining bitterly about it.

"Yeah, the punk says 'you gotta have evidence, lootenant, and this time there ain't any, lootenant. Not unless ya can read minds.' That's what he says, s'help me."

Maria! Pete thought with a sense of shock.

What was it Maria had said? When she was hungry, she didn't have the strength to hear far away. If she were well-fed, how far could she hear? All the way to Chicago?

The conclusion just couldn't be dodged. Maria and her Pa were involved. But how would she know she was doing something wrong? Whoever had latched onto her would be jubilant that they were putting something over on the cops. To Maria, cops were just the fuzz. Cops spelt trouble for her father. Cops meant the Welfare, and hospitals, and she didn't know which one scared her the most.

"At least," Pete said to Wizard, "she's not in that crummy room. She's cared for. That was all I wanted wasn't it? And she is a minor, so even when the gang gets pulled in, she won't be booked. Why, those hoods might even get a doctor to try and fix her up." He groaned. And I sure as hell can't go to the Chief and say, 'Look, there's a kid telepath running the numbers'. Not even if I *knew* where to find her."

Wizard nuzzled his hand.

"Now what would Al Finch be wanting with a high-priced specialist from Minneapolis?" the desk sergeant asked Pete when he came on duty the next night. "He's got medics and nurses hopping in and out of his pad like he had the Asian crud."

"Better him than you," said Pete, automatically laughing. But he was thinking *Maria!*

As soon as he could, he found out where Al Finch was living. When Pete saw a truck from a pet shop deliver a large triple cage of singing birds, he knew his hunch was right. Finch was making book with Maria's mind-reading ability.

"Maria," Pete called in his head. "Maria, answer me! I know you're there. What you're doing, reading numbers, is wrong. It's causing a lot of trouble. It'll get you in trouble, too."

Pete, came Maria's voice in his head, sweetly, happily.

Pete, I'm not hungry any more and I have so many pretty birds. And you should see how nice Pa looks now he's got a good job. I'm clean, and my whole room is clean. I've got pretty dresses.

Her giggle was light and tinkling. *Smelly men come and poke me around. They say they want to fix me. They can't, of course. Some of them say it out loud and some tell Al they can. Then they say inside they can't, that I'm a hopeless case.* She giggled again as if this amused her.

"Maria, I won't say Al isn't trying to help you and make you happy. But he gets more out of you than you get out of him. He's using you. You miss getting the numbers through once and he'll hurt you."

Maria's laugh bubbled up. *I don't let myself get hurt. And Al's all right. He thinks the damndest things sometimes.* and Pete felt a strange sense of shock at her language. She giggled naughtily, *He says he's my sugar-daddy.*

"Maria, you shouldn't use such words."

Maria's incredible laugh chimed through his head. *Al says it's cute the way I talk. And he really does like me.*

"I'll bet," Pete snapped. "Look, Maria, you can have the birds and the good food and a good job for your father but get them from other people. Al Finch is dangerous! He's got a record for assault, attempted homicide, you name it. I'm afraid he'll hurt you."

He wouldn't dare, Maria replied with complete self-assurance. *I'm very important to him, and I know he means it. Do you know I have my own Coke machine?*

"Maria, Maria," Pete groaned. *Oh God, how do I explain? How, please, do I have the nerve to try?*

"Maria," he called again as loud as he could in his mind. "Maria, just promise me one thing. You get scared . . . worried . . . call Wizard or Pirate. Any of the dogs. They'll protect you. *Call the dogs!*"

Wizard barked twice, paused, barked twice again. So did three stray dogs across the street. And a cat walking on a nearby fence meowed in the same sequence.

Pete tried not to worry. But she was so frail, well-fed or not, she couldn't have great reserves of energy. Finch might kill her without meaning to. He'd have to find a way to stop it.

On his day off, following a strong hunch, Pete hung around the betting windows at the Brandywine Raceway. Sure enough, Maria's father shuffled up to the \$10 window, just before the second race. Pete went right to him.

"You tell Al to be careful with Maria," he said. "He can use her too much, you know. He could kill her. And the cops'll tumble to Finch soon enough. They got a lead."

"Who're you?" the little man asked nervously, his face twitching as his red-rimmed eyes slid over Pete's face. "Fuzz?" He scurried away.

Pete had had a good look at his face, though, and was able to identify him in the rogue's gallery as Hector Barres. He had a record: vagrancy, drunk and disorderly, petty larceny. Now that he had been spotted in Al Finch's company, he was also suspected of numbers running.

No appeal based on Maria's frailty would reach Barres. He had right now all he wanted from life. Barres' thoughts were only for the money rolling in today. Tomorrow, and Maria's welfare, were far from his mind.

Now that he had Maria's last name, Pete checked hospital records and found her date of birth. Her mother had been brought into the emergency ward, picked up unconscious and already in active labor. The interne who delivered Maria had expressed doubts that the infant would survive, due to prenatal malnutrition.

Maria's mother had died in the same hospital two years later. The cause was neglect, but not on the part of the hospital. She had had tuberculosis, diabetes and a coronary condition. She had been severely beaten about the abdomen and died of internal hemorrhaging before they could operate.

Pete took to talking to Wizard on the beat at night, hoping Maria would overhear him. He told Wizard all about Maria's mother, about her father's record, about

how Maria could use her great gift to help people. He told her all he knew about paranormal powers, his guesses that she must conserve her energies; and he repeatedly cautioned her to call Wizard or Pirate if she felt endangered. Sometimes he had the feeling she listened to him. He knew she often talked to Wizard.

Then Al Finch stepped up his operations to include narcotics. Pete and the police went quietly berserk. No known pushers were in contact with Finch; all were clean when they were picked up. Not a sniff on them. But the stuff was circulating in greater quantities than had ever reached Wilmington before.

"Maria," Pete called resolutely to her from the corner opposite Al's apartment. "Do you know what narcotics do to people?"

Sure. They have the coolest dreams to read.

"Do you take it?" he gasped, frightened.

I don't need to, laughed Maria with a mirth that no longer chimed. Her voice—the essence of the voice she sent—was hard and brassy. *I dig it from other's. It's boss, man.*

"Then dig what happens when they can't pay to get it, Maria. Dig that and see how most it is!"

But, Pete honey; you gave me the idea yourself. It's much easier to grab the stuff from . . . well, never mind where. Her voice was sickeningly smug. *Easier than reading numbers out in Chicago. You said I was to take care of myself. I am.*

"I don't know why I bother with you. You know you're doing wrong, Maria. And when you get hurt, it'll be your own fault." Then . . .

He didn't know what hit him. When he came to, he he was in the emergency ward with Joe bending over him anxiously.

"Brother, you've been out three hours and there isn't a mark on you."

Pete carefully touched his sore head with exploratory fingers. He hurt all over: every nerve edge felt twisted, his head half unscrewed.

"I got clobbered." The phrase had never seemed so apt.

"Yeah, I know," Joe replied drily. "But with what?"

"Would you believe a girl telepath?" asked Pete plaintively.

"Right now," Joe replied wearily, "I'd believe an invasion of little green men."

Pee looked up at him, startled by the credulous bitterness in the young doctor's voice.

"What'd you mean, Joe?"

Joe grimaced, annoyed with himself, then swore under his breath. He stepped to the door, looked up and down the hall. Closing the door tightly, with one final cautious look through the small glass insert, he asked, "Do you know where Al Finch is getting narcotics, Pete?"

Pete groaned. "From the locked pharmacy cabinets of the hospitals."

Joe's eyes widened in stunned amazement. "How in hell did you know? Hahlgren didn't report it until noon and you've been in dreamland since then."

It was a relief to Pete to be able to tell someone his secret. When he finished, Joe shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Believe you I must. The drug cupboard was bare at 8:00 this morning. The question is, what do we do now?"

A few days later Hector Barres was admitted to the hospital, stricken with paralysis of the spine. Some of the drugs Maria had lifted from the hospital shelves were not pure opium. One was a thebaine compound which acted like strychnine and commonly caused spinal paralysis. Her father died of a heart attack shortly after his admission.

Suddenly the dogs began to howl. Every dog in Wilmington added his note to the clamor. The dogs howled for a full ear-splitting hour despite every attempt to silence them. The SPCA and the Humane Association, police and firemen, were called in—unsuccessfully—to disband a huge pack of hysterical dogs, cats and tree beasts congregated in Maria's neighborhood.

When Maria finally released them, the animals melted away in a matter of moments. Pete and Joe took up a position across from her windows.

"Maria," said Pete. "I brought Joe with me. He did everything he could to save your father. But you've been stealing the wrong kind of drugs. It was one of those that killed your father."

I know, said Maria in a flat, hard voice. There was an odd blurring to her projected voice which had always rung so clear and true in Pete's mind. *I've been . . . experimenting a little.*

There was a long pause. Pete suddenly experienced wild grief, a sense of terrified guilt which was quickly overlaid by a sullen resentment; and, finally, an irrational feeling of satisfaction.

He was a nasty old man. He was mean to me. He killed my mother.

Joe caught Pete's arm, his eyes wide with repugnance and dread.

You go away, Pete, Maria said. *I'll set my friends on you.*

"Maria, I don't care how much you threaten me," Pete said stolidly. "I have to tell you you're doing wrong."

Bug off, fuzz" Maria snapped. *I'm having fun. I never had fun before in my life. I'm living it up good now. You go away.*

"Pete," cautioned Joe, pulling at his arm urgently.

"Damn it, Maria . . ."

This time when Pete woke up in the emergency ward, Joe was in the next bed. They managed to talk the interne on duty into entering 'heat prostration' as the cause of their collapse. They promised faithfully to go to their respective homes and rest for the next 24 hours. Out on the hot street, Pete suggested that a couple of beers would start their unexpected holiday the right way so they adjourned to the nearest airconditioned bar.

The dogs began to howl again as they crossed the street.

"If we'd told anyone why the dogs howled," Pete said, moodily doodling in the moisture on the beer glass, "they would send us to the funny farm."

"Would you believe a hopped-up girl telepath?" Joe asked wistfully, and raised his glass in a mock toast.

"I only told her the truth," Pete protested.

"For truth she puts holes in our heads."

"All right, wise guy, what should I have done?"

"How do I know?" asked Joe with a helpless gesture of his hands. "My specialty's going to be internal medicine, not head-shrinking or pediatrics. I'm as lousy at this sort of work as you are." He thought for a while, holding his head.

"The trouble, Pete, is neither you nor me . . . nor Maria. The trouble is the situation and the circumstances. If she'd had the sense to get born a Dupont instead of a Barres . . . And he made a slicing motion with one hand.

They got drunker and drunker, somehow agreeing on only one thing: they were both so sensitive in the head-bone that they couldn't give a j.d. brat the spanking she so richly deserved . . .

Or rescue her from hell.

Al Finch finally decided that Wilmington offered too little scope for his operation's potential. Pete got the word from the desk sergeant that Finch had hired a private plane and a private ambulance.

Pete made a frantic phone call to Joe Lavelle to meet him across from Maria's at once. Joe arrived in time to watch Maria being carried from the apartment on a stretcher.

"God Almighty, look," Pete cried. "Al Finch, framed by canaries!"

Executing an intricate shuffle step, the gangleader was maneuvering the elaborate five-foot cylindrical triple birdcage through the door, all the while bellowing con-

flicting orders at his subordinates. That kept them bobbing so solicitously between Al and Maria that they all got royally in each other's way.

Then the rear stretcher-bearer tripped on the uneven sidewalk. He went down on one knee, losing his grip on the handles. Maria, her tiny body strapped to the stretcher, was jolted. The forward bearer, unaware for a moment of the accident, continued on and pulled the handles out of his companion's grip so that Maria, head downward, was dragged jouncingly along the sidewalk. With a yelp, Al leaped forward, unceremoniously depositing the canary cage on the lawn where it rested at a dangerous tilt. He collided with one of his cohorts who had also jumped to the rescue. The two of them succeeded in startling the forward bearer and the front end of Maria's stretcher dropped with a second jarring jolt.

Like the incredible noise that issues from a cyphering organ played full through faulty stops, a chorus of strident howls arose. Starting with the piercing yelps of nearby dogs, it grew in intensity and volume as Maria, battered, painracked, summoned her friends. They came bounding in answer to her call. With uncharacteristic ferocity, three poodles and a terrier launched themselves at the stretcher-men. Before Finch could touch Maria, a collie and two boxers cut him off, snapping and snarling. The indignant doorman was tripped by a frantic cocker who plunged at him from the lobby.

"Christ Almighty, she's called *all* the dogs," Joe cried.

A yelping, yapping, yipping vortex of sound with a rumbling, roaring ground-bass enveloped the area. The street soon became one seething mass of dogs, from ragged Scotties to leaping Dalmatians. More kept arriving on the scene, many dragging snapped ropes and chains, towing stakes, one even hauling a doghouse; many were snaking leashes along behind them.

"She's called too many!" Pete cried. "She'll get hurt!"

As one, Pete and Joe started across the street, stepping on and over dog bodies. Pete caught a glimpse of a pro-

tective ring of dogs forming around Maria's man-abandoned stretcher.

"Maria, Maria!" he shouted over the tumult. "Call off the dogs. Call them off!"

The sheer press of numbers would overrun her. Kicking, flailing, Pete waded on. A cat, leaping from a stopped car roof, raked him with her claws. Joe reached the other curb and fell, momentarily lost under the bounding bodies.

Suddenly, as though cut off from an invisible conductor, all sound ceased. The silence was as terrifying as the noise but now the momentum of the charging animals faltered. Pete made it to the sidewalk in that pause. Neither Maria, stretcher nor sidewalk was visible under the smooth and brindled, spotted, mottled, rough and shaggy blanket of dogs and occasional cats.

Cursing wildly, both he and Joe labored, throwing the stunned animals out of the way until a space was cleared around the overturned stretcher. The upset bird cage rolled down to the sidewalk, coming to rest with the bent door uppermost. In a flurry of orange and yellow feathers, frightened canaries flew hysterically aloft, their frantic chirps ominous and shrill.

Unable to move, Pete watched as Joe carefully turned the stretcher over. The two men stood looking down at Maria's crushed and bloodied body, trampled by the zeal of her would-be protectors. Then Pete joined her hands, moved by some obscure impulse.

At this point the dogs, released from the weird control that had summoned them and immobilized them at the moment of its passing, remembered ancient enmities. The abortive rescue mission turned into a thousand private battles.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pete saw Wizard coming hell-for-leather down the street. Finch staggered to his feet, clawing his way up, using the birdcage as a support. With a howl, Wizard knocked him down again. Pete grabbed the man and arrested him for disturbing the

peace. Wizard stood guard, in much better shape than any others of Maria's protectors, thanks to his late arrival.

The news story never mentioned that a human had been killed in the great dog riot. But it was noted that the unearthly canine choruses that had been plaguing Wilmington ended with that unscheduled concert.

But sometimes now when Pete Roberts is walking the beat with his K-9 partner, Wizard will suddenly start acting itchy and nervous. He whines and pulls, straining against the leash.

"Heel," says Pete stolidly, pretending nothing's happened.

One of these days I'll really put on the pressure.

Kris Neville and K. M. O'Donnell represent two faces of the same coin each brings an incisive and satiric wit to science fiction. Neville became instantly famous with the appearance of Cold War twenty years ago; O'Donnell with the appearance of Final War in 1968. That each should have chosen to attack the same theme in their springboards to acclaim is another similarity in their character; hopefully, the collaboration begun with the following story will be repeated many times in the future.

PACEM EST

Kris Neville and K. M. O'Donnell

God, in his heavens, was lonely.

I

For four days the dead nun lay under the barbed wire in a cold luminescence that seemed to be candlelight. In a stricken way, she seemed at peace; she seemed to have located an answer.

II

Hawkins was himself obsessed with answers at that period and he passed her twice each day, admiring the way she had taken to death: the cold frieze of her features under the stars, the slight, stony chasms of her cheek coming out against the wide brown eyes. Someone, probably a detail sergeant, had clasped hands over the chest after she died and so there was a curious air of grace and receptivity to her aspect; almost, Hawkins thought, as if she were clutching the lover, Death, to herself past that abandoned moment when he had slammed into her. His reactions to the nun comprised the most profound religious experience of his life.

She lay there for four days and might have been there a week if Hawkins had not taken up the issue himself with the company chaplain, insisting that something be done because such superstitious and unsettling events

could turn the platoon under his command into demoralized savages.

The chaplain, head of the corpse detail, carried a large cane and believed in the power of the cane to raise the dead and create spells.

The next morning, when Hawkins took his men out on a patrol, the nun was gone and the barbed wire with her; in her place they had put a small block of wood on the fields; it gave her name and dates of birth and death and said something in Latin about being *in memoriam*. Hawkins felt much better, but later, implications of the bizarre four-day diorama exfoliated in his thoughts, and he decided that he didn't feel so good after all.

III

SISTER ALICE ROSEMARIE, etc, etc, the wood said. GONE TO HER REST, 2196. BORN SOMETIME, AROUND 2160, WE THINK.

IN QUONIBUS EST HONORARUM DE PLUMUS AU CEROTORIUM MORATORIUM.

Caveat emptor.

IV

The nuns were always there, administering comfort to the men and helping the chaplain out at services and even occasionally pitching in on the messline, although the men could have done without that part of it nicely. Someone in the company who was Catholic said that it was one of the most astonishing displays of solidarity with battle the Church had ever given anyone. Hawkins imagined, like himself, that the nuns were simply moving around on assignments. When the next one came through, they would get out.

The nun who had been killed had, apparently, wandered out for some private religious ritual and met stray silver wisps of the enemy gas which traveled from the alveoli of the lungs to become exploding emboli in the roiling blood of the ventricle, leaving her outward appearance unchanged. The other nuns, Hawkins supposed

had wanted to pick her up but feared to defy the hastily erected signs saying AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY PERMITTED INTO THE KILLING AREA and that had led to the whole complication of getting rid of the body. All of it still would not have been so particularly distressing to him if these events had not come in his period of religious revival.

He had never been much for religion: men who become captains of reconnaissance patrols in major wars were not, after all, profoundly religious types. They accept what they are told, and seldom, if ever, think beyond the conventional wisdom of their *millieux*.

But Hawkins had begun to feel twinges of remorse and fear from the moment he landed on the planet—probably helped along by his first view of the caged alien at the entry port. Just as indoctrination had warned, the aliens looked exactly like our own troops.

Then, too, the more he became aware of the death rate, to say nothing of the fact that the aliens were out to kill all of mankind, the more he began to feel convulsions, succumb to dim, vague fits of gloom in which he visualized himself taking complicated vows of withdrawal. It had some subtly demoralizing effect upon his work. Still, he might have reached some fragile accommodation if it had not been for the business of the dead nun which coalesced all his thinking and began to lead him to the distinct feeling that he was going insane.

On the sixth night after the removal of the body and the erection of the wooden block, Hawkins cleaned up after he had returned to the area and, in what was the best approximation of dress uniform he could make in the terrain, wandered to the rear where the nuns were; stood idly outside the huts for a time, holding his helmet in one hand; and wondering exactly what he was going to do.

V

Remember, they had been instructed; the fate of man-

kind depends upon your showing here, but do not feel in any way that you are under pressure.

VI

The old nun's face seemed strangely dull and full. It passed from one of the huts toward another and then, for some reason, stopped and asked him what he wanted.

"I want to pay my respects to the dead one. To the dead . . ." In his embarrassment, Hawkins was unable to think of the word. "To the dead female priest," he said, finally.

"That would be Teresa," said the nun. "She never understood what was happening—she always talked of flowers and trees; but she had wanted to come so badly because it was the decision of the order that all of us were to come, without exception. She said she was afraid, but all things could be part of heaven if they were observed so; and then, of course, she died. You were the one who arranged for her removal?"

Hawkins nodded dumbly.

The old nun touched him lightly, two fingers spread to accommodate his wrist, and then led him toward the hut. "It was quite kind of you," she said. "We wanted to send for Teresa, but they wouldn't let us. They said it wasn't permitted. We had to think of how she lay there in indignity—and then you returned her to us."

"Well, I tried," Hawkins said.

"We couldn't manage stone, so we used wood. We had to sneak the marker in. She was very unlucky, Teresa. No luck at all."

"Unlucky?" Hawkins said. He had always believed that religious people made their own luck, uneven but connected.

They were at the door of the hut now, that door being comprised of a series of burlap sacks which had been strung together, and she pushed them aside to lead him in.

"Sit down," she said, pointing at some spot in the flick-

ering darkness where he could sense a low slung chair. "You'll want to talk to the Mother Superior."

"That wouldn't be necessary."

"It's the way we do things. But she isn't prepared yet."

"Do you think I could pray here?" Hawkins asked pointlessly. "Would you mind?"

"If you want to. It doesn't do much good, though. But we can give you a book."

"No books," Hawkins said. "No *books*. I want to make up the words all by myself."

"Of course," the nun said, and went away. Hawkins clasped his hands and began to mumble words like FATHER and KYRIE ELEISON and HOLY MARY, which were about all he could remember of the things he had picked up about it; but even in the murmuring stillness, with the effect given by the one candle on the shelves above him, it wouldn't quite take.

It occurred to Hawkins for the first time that he had absolutely nothing to say to God, and for some reason this cheered him; if that were the case, then God probably had nothing to say to him in return. And he would undoubtedly not be in the kind of trouble he had been fearing. There was no question of interference from forces or people with whom you had no communication.

He thought about the dead nun then, and for the moment it was without horror; perhaps the calm of her features had been an utter resignation rather than a lapsed attention caught by the fumes. It was possible, in fact, that she had died in knowledge, and if that were so it made this more the bearable—although not entirely so, of course.

After a while the curtains parted again and the old nun came out. She was dressed in what Hawkins took to be a Mother Superior's outfit and she looked very well indeed. He was not surprised in the least; he had expected it from the start.

"So, then," she said. "Now I am Mother Florence and I am prepared to properly sit by you. That was a very fine thing you did for us, and you are blessed for it."

"But why did you come out here?" Hawkins said. He was being matter-of-fact about the identity question because it was, of course, the Mother Superior's business, and not his.

"We in this order believe that the revelations of St. John are most fully realized, or to be realized in the events of these particular days. We wish to hold out, for you, against the Apocalypse."

"There are no revelations of St. John," said Hawkins, the refutation holding only a private meaning for himself. "There is no Apocalypse, either."

"We feel otherwise," she stated, calmly.

"What about your Teresa? Does she choose to believe? Dead nuns are deadlier than dead men. I'm sorry; there was no need for that."

The nun touched his shoulder. "We have borne worse. We come, and we observe; we hold, and we pray. And we give what comfort we are able."

Later, away from the hut, Hawkins wandered toward the center of the encampment. Drifting around him were strange night odors and within him his rage, and he guessed, as he picked up his pace, that when the two of them combined—the outside and the inside—they might make a kind of sense; there might be something to his feelings, his being. And in that hope he burst free, still moving, through the area itself and out to the other end, to the fields. Unswerving, poised with the grace of insistence, he plunged toward the wooden block in the distance. When he got there he caved it over with a sigh, feeling its edges rolling against him; he pivoted on his back to look at the sky, wondering from where and from when his brothers the aliens would place their special silver stake in his heart.

To combat his loneliness, God invented religion.

Rumor has it that 1.7 out of every 256 individuals in this country cannot appreciate a Ron Goulart story. These hapless souls are to be pitied . . .

KEEPING AN EYE ON JANEY

Ron Goulart

The small blond man looked across the desk at him and said, "*The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere.*"

Barry Rhymer poured himself more coffee from the gourd shaped karafe his wife had given him and said, "What?"

Shrugging with one shoulder, Bernard Hunzler repeated, "*The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere.*"

Barry turned to watch the smudged brick walls outside his office window. "Excuse me, Bernard, I was thinking about something else. Yes, I like the title. Did I mention Flash Books has a new policy about our gothics? Now all we editors have to have an outline before we can request an advance. Just a couple of pages I can show to our business people here."

Hunzler asked, "Why? Look, I'm Bernadette Austen, the queen of gothic terror. I told you the title. Now give me the \$1500 advance and I'll go home and write the thing."

"We have a new treasurer."

"I've written twenty-seven of these things for you, Barry. I helped make the gothic revival the terrific thing it is in the 1970's," said Hunzler. "Now you do this to me. Listen, *The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere*, a Flash Books Gothic Special by Bernadette Austen, the Acknowledged Queen of Horror Thrills. Give me the money."

Barry said, "Tell me the idea while you're here and I'll have it typed up for you, Bernard. Best I can do."

"I promised Mother I'd buy her a rabbit skin coat by the end of 1976," said Hunzler. "Here it is the middle of 1977 and she's still freezing her ass in the Bronx."

"A couple of pages to show our business people. I'm sorry. It's a new policy." Barry's desk phone rang and he flipped on the view screen and took up the speaker. "Yes?"

"I can," continued Hunzler, "go right over to Crack Books and say *The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere* and they'll hand me fifteen hundred bucks before you can blink." He grinned sadly, shifted his rimless glasses to a new position on his nose.

On the plate-shaped phone screen a heavy set man with a head of short cropped gray hair had appeared. "Hello, Barry Rhymer," he said. "It's Gores of Gores Investigations here. You wanted to talk to me about the case we're working on for you?"

"Can I call you back in a few minutes?"

"I'm on a tail job right this minute," Gores told him. "I'm calling you from the 53rd Street branch of the New York Public Library while the pigeon is inside leafing through picture books on Etruscan art."

"You have a nice eye for details, Mr. Gores," said Barry. "I have someone with me. Just a second."

"An investigator is no good if he doesn't pay attention," said Gores. "I could have put a mechanical tail on this guy but I like to have personal contact. I used to pound a beat, 87th Precinct, back in the late sixties and it gave me a permanent taste for outdoor detective work."

"Bernard," said Barry, "this is a private conversation. Wait in the reception room."

Hunzler stood and pointed at the dictation typewriter under the other window of the narrow brown room. "I'll dictate my plot into that while you're talking. When I'm creating I don't hear, so you don't have to worry." He went and seated himself at the machine. "*The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere*," he said into the activated mike.

Barry hesitated, then spoke to Gores in a lowered voice. "It's about the mechanical operative your detective agency has in our home, Mr. Gores."

"He likes to be called Carnahan," said the agency head. "We go along with our mechanicals. Little individual quirks are what make the Gores outfit superior to most. What's the problem?"

Hunzler dictated, "Emily Frazier's mother and father are killed in India and she must fend for herself in the harsh competitive world of 19th Century London. It is, therefore, with a sigh of relief that Emily Frazier notes in the daily press of the period an advertisement seeking a governess for the two deranged sons of the lord of a mansion in the remote seaside town of Ledgemere."

"Well," said Barry to the detective, "your Carnahan is getting too aggressive, Mr. Gores. You know, I only wanted him to, well, you know."

"See what your wife was up to while you're in the city earning your livelihood," said Gores. "And that's exactly what Carnahan has been doing and is doing. A damn competent job."

"I'm wondering if I really need such bulky equipment. Originally, you remember, I asked for something compact. Postage stamp size maybe."

"All that type of stuff can't give you the details Carnahan can. It doesn't have his judgement, nor his compassion. You get one of those bugging devices the size of a grain of sand and its got brains and heart to match." Gores looked back over his shoulder. "There was a fad for that stuff in the early seventies, but most sensible operatives are back with the heavy hardware again."

"Maybe," said Barry.

"Carnahan, believe me, is ideally suited to sit out there at your house in Harborland Estates, Long Island, and keep track of your wife and her carrying on."

"Okay, okay," said Barry softly. "But Carnahan keeps talking lately about taking a more active part in what's going on. He may, I don't know, speak up or do something physical."

"He does have those little hands and a concealed pistol built in for emergencies," said Gores. "I'll let you in on something, though. Carnahan is programmed to feel a little tougher than he really is. In these divorce cases you need an operative who thinks somewhat hardboiled."

"It's not," said Barry, "a divorce, Mr. Gores. I love Janey. I only wanted to find out what she was doing."

"You found out," said Gores. "She's sleeping with the top Mafia man on Long Island."

Barry winced, glanced over at Bernard Hunzler. Hunzler, his eyes nearly closed, was saying into the mike, "What then is the dark secret of the third floor of the strange house at Ledgemere. Why are certain rooms shuttered and barred? Why does the Victorian plumbing work no better than it does?"

"Naturally," continued Gores, "Carnahan's blood boils when he sees this Wally Rasmussen visiting your wife while you're here toiling in the canyons of commerce."

"This guy Rasmussen," said Barry, his lips hardly moving, "is not actually a top Mafia man, Mr. Gores. He's associated with the Amateur Mafia, which is that new crime syndicate that started in the early seventies. They're more liberal about who can join, take in non-Italians and so on."

"Who told you that?"

"I read it in *Newsday*."

"Yeah, well, Mafia or Amateur Mafia, he's a punk; and a hood in any case."

Barry said, "I admit that. Still, I don't want Carnahan doing something obtrusive. He just gets the facts and I take the action."

"What are you planning to do?"

"I haven't enough facts yet."

Gores head snapped suddenly to the left. "There goes my pigeon. Looks like he just boosted four high priced coffee table books on Etruscan art. Don't worry. Our chief computer is always in phone line contact with Carnahan. We'll have a talk with him. Bye bye." The screen blanked to its usual rose white.

"Thus it is that Emily Frazier emerges from the shadows at long last," Hunzler was dictating. "She can walk the proud halls of the mansion and be the true bride of Ledgemere for once and for all." He waited for the machine to finish typing and punched it off. He grinned another sad grin over at Barry. "That's worth more than \$1500. The scene where the grave robbers burn down the grange hall is going to be terrific."

"Okay, I'll try to get a check out to you by early next month. Still at your mother's address?"

"Where else?" Hunzler left and Barry went back to watching the bricks.

Janey, a long lean girl with slim tan legs, dropped a servomechanism and said, "Damn. That's the third servomechanism I've dropped since breakfast. Not my day, Barry."

Barry bent and swept up the scattered cogs and springs from the kitchen floor with the side of his palm. He got all the parts of the broken coffee grinder gathered into his cupped hands and then dumped them into the repair chute. "Maybe you can join me for a martini. Relax before dinner."

"The martini mixer is one of the servos I broke," said his tall blonde wife.

"Oh," said Barry. Above the whirrings of the kitchen he could hear the surf hit the beach far below Harborland Estates. "I guess then I'll take a shower now, change."

"I could make you a drink by hand," said Janey. "I'm good at things like that."

"If you'd like."

"Would you like me to?"

"Sure, if it's no trouble."

"There's no trouble taking trouble for you." Janey hugged herself and her breasts huddled closer together. "Honestly, Barry. Why can't you be more direct? Assert yourself. You're thirty-one."

"Thirty," he corrected. "What do you want? Would

you like me to come home and act like some wild Viking out of a Flash Books barbarian novel?"

"Better that than some Bernie Hunzler heroine," said his wife. "Better than moping around like poor little Emily Frazier going out to Briarcliff Manor to look after two deranged kids."

Barry said, "Wait. Say that again."

"You don't have any balls."

"No, I don't mean the essence. The specific words."

The slender blonde said, "I was referring to Bernie's book before last that I proofread when you had the flu. *The Shadow Bride of Briarcliff*."

"Christ," said Barry. "I just bought the same gothic novel twice."

Janey said, "Who'd know?"

"I don't want to have an argument."

"So don't."

"I buy us this damn place where you can actually hear the Long Island Sound." He waved in the direction of the beach. "You might as well face things, Janey. *The Shadow Bride of Briarcliff* helps pay for that ocean." He rose up on his toes, sighed and spun around. He aimed himself at their bedroom and went in there.

The bed said, "Dames are like jungle cats. You have to treat them rough."

"Shut up," said Barry. He closed the room's laminated door and shook his head at the kingsize bed. He noticed a wisp of smoke coming up from the rug. "Hey, are you on the fritz?"

"Relax, sweetheart," said the bed's hidden speaker grid. "I'm enjoying a gasper."

"A what?"

"A cigarette. Your pal Rasmussen left a pack of bootleg coffin nails behind and I just set fire to one and am having a drag. Sometimes when I'm alone here time can seem as lonely as a football stadium in the off season."

"Smoking in bed is dangerous." Barry sat down, slumped, on a lemon yellow lounge chair. "I don't know, Carnahan."

"I know," replied the bed. "Knowing is my business, sweetheart. There's not a dame alive you can trust."

"Keep your voice down." Barry tilted and unfastened his shoes. Moving across the rug he reached into the bathroom and started the water roaring in the shower stall. "Was that guy here again today?"

"You ought to read my reports more carefully," said the bed. "Rasmussen is almost always here, sweetheart. Unless she's there." A slight gurgling came from beneath the disguised listening mechanism.

"What else have you got under there, Carnahan?"

"Rasmussen also left the good part of a fifth of bourbon behind."

"You're actually programmed to drink, too?"

"I'm not a cop, sweetheart. I can drink on duty." His voice was taking on a bit of a brogue.

"I thought Janey never liked bourbon." Barry said, "I keep trying, Carnahan, to come up with some mutually satisfying solution to this situation."

"Sometimes," said the surveillance device, "lead is the best solution."

"Lead?"

"Bullets talk louder than words," Carnahan told him. "Let's get something straight. I'm more than just another bugging device. Sure, I can tape conversations, film assignments, collect data on adultery. But the New York State law is such at the moment that evidence collected by a bed is not admissible in a divorce action. So I give you the dope I gather and you have to decide what to do. I can have opinions, though, sweetheart." He apparently took another drink.

"You guys, you and Gores, are always talking about divorce." Barry paced from the bed to the open bathroom. "I never said anything about separating from Janey."

"Don't lump me with Gores," said the bed. "He's only my partner."

"Gores is your partner now? Come on, you're nothing but a monitoring device."

"I might even go into business on my own sometime," said Carnahan. "I'm getting tired of these divorce cases anyway. They leave a bad taste in my soul. I'd like to work outside more."

"You'd look great trailing somebody up 53rd Street."

Carnahan exhaled cigarette smoke. "This caper may get cut off sooner than you think."

Barry strode back to the bed. "What does that mean?"

"There's a contract out on Rasmussen," said Carnahan. "The real Mafia doesn't like the way the Amateur Mafia is cutting in on things here in Long Island. They're going to hit Rasmussen."

"You mean kill him?"

"Cancel him in lead," said Carnahan. "Make him a candidate for the hoodoo wagon."

Barry said, "I hadn't seen anything about the rivalry being that intense."

Carnahan said, "And you won't read anything in the papers about the torpedoes who were parked across the street."

"Gangsters across the street?"

"Most of this afternoon, sitting in one of those little electric sports cars," the bed told him. "They're not the boys who'll make the hit, just a couple of gunsels staking Rasmussen out for Giacomo Macri's Mafia family. Outside talent will be brought in for the real kill job."

Barry said, "You're telling me that Mafia people are parking around outside our house in little electric sports cars and plotting to kill Wally Rasmussen?"

"Little red electric sports car."

"No, they wouldn't try to kill anybody in Harborland Estates."

"Death doesn't have much class sense, sweetheart."

Barry put his palms flat on his chest. "But Janey might get hurt."

Carnahan said, "She may not be the best dame in the world, but she's a good kid at heart. Nothing's going to happen to her while I'm around."

Barry wandered toward the bathroom. "I'll do something."

"Yell copper?"

"Not the police yet, no. They might make more of a mess than you and Gores have. I'll have to talk to Janey."

The bed dropped the bourbon bottle. "Oops," it said. "Okay, have it your way, sweetheart. You're the client."

"Another thing," said Barry. "My agreement with Gores states you're supposed to turn yourself off and not record when Janey and I are here. And I don't think you're keeping all your mechanisms well enough hidden under there. Janey's bound to notice you when she makes up the bed."

The bed chuckled. There was a faint click and Carnahan stopped talking.

Walking into the bathroom, Barry stood around.

The folding chair unfolded itself when Barry activated it, setting itself up on the sand. The copy of the weekend edition of *Newsday* flashed its headline when he tossed it into the chair. *Prominent L.I. Hood Gunned Down*. Barry had read the story already, found it wasn't any of the prominent hoods he knew about. Gulls were sitting out on the buff colored rock near the shore. He turned from the headline and stood trying to concentrate on the brownish birds.

At the waters edge Janey, in a one piece black jersey swimsuit, was rambling in the shallow water. Barry set his lips in a firm position and was about to stride to her when he heard something in the thick brush of the hillside behind him. He turned. A wide swath of twisted bushes and scrubby grass was being agitated as something low and wide descended from above. Barry checked on Janey and saw her bend and skim a white pebble across the quiet water. He walked up toward the rattling underbrush. He jogged when he got to the rough path leading back toward their sea-edge home.

"The ocean looks like a great reservoir of sadness," said Carnahan.

"What in the hell are you doing out here?" He hopped off the path and into the bushes. Carnahan was in there, tilted way over to the left and smoking a cigar.

"I just got a tip from a stoolie the Gores computer knows," the bed told him. "This is a hot tip."

Barry looked up toward the backs of the other three houses sharing this stretch of beach. "Have you been drinking bourbon again? Coming out here in the middle of the morning. Somebody's going to see you." He put a hand against the footboard and gave a tentative push.

"People are used to odd things in the suburbs, sweetheart," said Carnahan. "Get this straight now. I just heard that Giacomo Macri has hired a couple of boys from Detroit to hit Rasmussen. It's going to happen real soon."

Barry stopped and put a shoulder to the redwood footboard. "Okay. Now go back uphill."

"That's a real Maxfield Parrish sky today, isn't it?" remarked the big bed. "I've got to get more outside work."

"When are these guys going to do it?"

"All I know is soon."

Barry said, "I'm going to talk to Janey right now."

"Okay, sweetheart. I won't take the play away from you yet." Carnahan grunted, made a high pitched whirring sound.

"They're going to hear that, somebody is. What's wrong?"

"It's tough to get traction in this sandy ground."

Barry put his shoulder to the bed and after a moment of straining Carnahan's wheels took hold and he shot forward and began rolling, rattling, uphill and away.

The gulls on the rock all took off when Barry neared Janey. "You scared the birds," she said.

"Janey," he said.

"Now what?"

"Sometimes," he said, "we're judged by the company we keep."

"True." She ran two fingers of her left hand along her thigh, then picked up a pale orange pebble with the toes

of her left foot and flicked it into the foam of the ocean.

"What I mean is, sometimes when we play with fire, if you'll forgive the cliché, we sort of get burned, as they say, I guess."

"Also true. So?"

"Well," said Barry, glancing at Connecticut across the water. "There's a lot of crime around these days and it's a problem."

Janey frowned, her lips parted. "Listen, Barry."

"Yes?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, never mind." She walked away from him, out into the water.

He hesitated, didn't follow.

The doctor's face faded from the phone screen on the living room coffee table. "Dr. Lupoffsky says it isn't," Barry called toward the kitchen.

Janey brought him a container of self brewing tea and placed it on the table. "Isn't the Brazilian flu again?"

"I thought I had a relapse. But this is the Argentine flu."

"At least it's still South American. What are you supposed to do?"

"Same as with Brazilian flu. Stay home from work a couple of days, drink fluids," Barry said. "Do I look particularly green to you, by the way?"

"No," said his wife. "Should you?"

"Dr. Lupoffsky said the only thing that worried him was the green tinge to my face."

"He says that to all his patients," said Janey. "The color reception on his phone is out of adjustment."

The phone sounded and Janey flicked it on. Bernard Hunzler appeared on the screen. "Barry there, he's not in his office they told me?"

"Barry is sick today, Bernie."

"Only take a minute, Jane," said the gothic writer. "Hey, Barry, can you hear me?"

"I'll take it," Barry said, gently pushing Janey away from in front of the phone screen. "Yes, Bernard?"

"Can't we salvage *The Shadow Bride of Ledgemere*, Barry? Make it a series. The gothic adventures of Emily Frazier." Hunzler grinned and his eyebrows drooped.

"No, we don't want a new series at Flash Books right now. Just change the names and the plot and resubmit the outline."

"I was hoping to get the \$1500 right away. I've got to buy mother the electric blanket."

"I thought it was a rabbit coat."

"She broke her hip over the weekend and she's confined to bed."

Janey pulled the red cellophane tag on the tea cup and the tea began to steam. Barry said, "Change the names and the title, Bernard."

"*The Shadow Towers of Woodville*," said Hunzler. "How's that sound?"

The front door of the house was pushed in and two men in tan jumpsuits stepped over the threshold. They had net stockings with paisley patterns pulled over their faces. One aluminum revolver was in the gloved right hand of each man. "Okay, Big Wally," said the man moving into the room. His stocking mask was sky blue.

Into the phone Barry said, "Call the police."

"What kind of title is that for a gothic?"

The other gunman, the backup man, jerked the phone cord from its baseboard slot. "We got no orders on the dame. Just you, Rasmussen. We hit here after ten, when the schmuck who lives here is at work."

Janey swallowed. "He's not Wally Rasmussen. He's my husband."

"Into the bedroom, lady," said the man with the sky blue mask.

"I'm not Rasmussen," said Barry. "Her husband is home sick today. It's me."

"Sure, sure, Rasmussen," said the other gunman. His stocking mask was fire pink. "Look, you're dealing with the real old established Mafia here. We aren't amateurs. Giacomo Macri set this all up perfect. He even used a computer. Bam, we fly in, bam, we hit you, bam, we go

back home on that new Penn Central train. It's lovely."

"Look at him," insisted Janey. "Does he look like Rasmussen?"

"Sure. A little greener than in his photos, but more or less. Well, not that much maybe but we haven't got time to fool around. We're already one bam behind."

"Didn't you hear him say Macri used a computer on this," said the other masked man. "Those things don't make mistakes. Rasmussen is supposed to be here weekdays after ten, so this is him. You want to be gunned down standing or sitting. Big Wally?"

"Okay, punks, grab some ceiling," said a harsh, faintly Irish voice. The bedroom door was swinging open. "Drop the roscoes and reach." Carnahan, still unmade and rumpled, rolled up to the opening. From beneath his box springs two black .45 automatics were pointing.

"Who's under there?" asked the fire pink gunman.

"The name is Carnahan, sweetheart. Drop the rods."

The man let his pistol fall, but his partner did not. He dived to the side and started firing at Carnahan.

Carnahan's two automatics roared at once with a tremendous sound. The gunman was hit in the left side, but he kept on shooting. The big bed was having trouble squeezing through the doorway. He had to tilt himself up partially sideways and that put him at an awkward angle. The wounded gunman put four bullets into Carnahan's underside.

Barry had jumped up at the first shot and rushed Janey across the room, down on the floor and away from the shooting. "Into the kitchen," he told her now.

The masked man who'd given up his gun grabbed it up and ran for the front door as Carnahan began shooting again. "This isn't going as programmed," he said as he left.

His partner got off one more shot at Carnahan's still exposed mechanism and followed out the front door.

The living room was sharp with the scent of gunpowder. Barry waited for a moment, then stood. "You okay, Janey?"

She hugged herself, said, "Yes. You?"

"Seem to be."

Carnahan gave a rasping cough. His voice was dim when he asked, "Hey, are you two kids okay?"

Barry approached the bed. "I'll get you unstuck and we'll have you repaired, Carnahan."

One of Carnahan's automatics dropped from his retractable metal hand. "No, sweetheart, it's too late for repairs. Too late for tears. I figure I can kiss tomorrow goodbye."

Janey got to her feet and came toward her husband. "We have some talking to do, Barry," she said. "I'll call the police now."

"No," Barry said. "We'll talk first, then call the police."

"The big sleep," said Carnahan. "The big sleep." He made a low ratcheting sound and ceased to function.

We are born to play a certain role. The fortunate in life find that role one of their own choosing . . .

THE PACKERHAUS METHOD

Gene Wolfe

The social worker sat primly, knees together, hands in lap. She looked the part, with short, sensible hair, round-lensed glasses and large, kind, brown eyes.

The old woman in the rocker looked *her* part too, perhaps almost too much: snow white hair, bifocals, knitting, cat. "It's the Packerhaus method," she said. "Perhaps you've heard of it?" She was smiling at her two front doors.

"Mmmh," the social worker replied, looking troubled.

"Meow," said the cat.

"The Packerhaus method. I believe I heard you to say that you were familiar with the name but not fully cognizant of all the details?"

The social worker waved a hand. "Something like that. It's rather a shock to have one pop out at me in that way and then learn . . ." She let the sentence trail away, wishing she could herself.

"Fine," the old woman said. She had been knitting, apparently, instead of listening. One of the front doors opened and a man in uniform rapped gently on the varnished frame. "Meter reader."

The old woman looked up from her knitting, smiling. "In the basement," she said. "Just come right through, Frank."

The uniformed man smiled in return and moved across

the living room on a small rectangular platform. A door at the far side opened to receive him.

The social worker gulped. "He didn't walk," she said. "He was riding on a sort of little cart."

"The Packerhaus method is not perfect." The old woman looked at her severely. "And please note, my dear, that neither I nor Col. Packerhaus ever once said it was. He was my cousin, did I tell you that? But it gives, in the felicitous phrase the Colonel coined, 'a living memorial to the living.' That became the motto of the company he founded when he left the Army Graves Registration Service, you know."

"No," the social worker said humbly. "I didn't."

"The Colonel conceived of his method as a means of assuaging the grief of the sorrowing parents, wives, and sweethearts; but it was not really well suited, as he used to say subsequently, to a military application. So many soldiers are damaged by death."

The meter reader re-emerged from the door he had entered and glided across the room again, tipping his cap.

"Your grandfather . . . didn't your grandfather come through that door a minute ago?"

"My father." The old woman nodded, rocking. "A wonderful man, looking for a light for his cigar. That's what he does, mostly—looks for a light." She sat rocking and knitting after pronouncing this, half waiting for the social worker to reply, half listening for the tea kettle. After a time an old man with a cigar in his fingers entered the room on a platform like the meter man's. He wore drooping black trousers and a loose white shirt, and looked like Mark Twain and a little like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The social worker jerked slightly on seeing him, and he asked her for a match; he had a deep, resonant voice.

"You shouldn't smoke, Papa," the old woman said. And to the social worker, "It's the Packerhaus method. I believe I told you?"

"You mean he's not just a doll?"

"Oh no." The old woman shook her head, smiling. He's

a living memorial. By which the Colonel and I mean that it is really he. Aren't you you, Papa?"

He was looking under an antimacassar for matches.

"The Packerhaus method," the old woman continued, "preserves the entire brain by saturating it with a phenolic resin. Then an exterior source of voltage powers the nerve impulses." She leaned forward confidentially, lowering her voice. "He can't breathe, you know. I don't keep matches in the house, but sometimes he remembers that he can light his cigar from the stove element. Then he finds out he can't draw on it, and it makes him very angry."

The social worker was watching the old man's back. "If he can't breathe, how can he speak?"

"A fan," the old woman said. "A fan in the base forces air past his vocal cords. The tube runs up his leg."

"Meow," said the cat.

Turning around the old man asked for a match again in his deep voice; the social worker said she had none and he left.

"Not back to the stove, I hope," the old woman said. "He'll lift off my teakettle and forget to put it back. I always made tea for him when he was ill. Did I tell you that?"

The social worker shook her head and asked, "He can still move?" She looked faint.

"Of course he can still move. That was the other half of Col. Packerhaus's great discovery. Muscles, you know, will still respond to an impulse after death. We used to do it with frogs' legs and a galvanic cell when I was a little girl in school—no doubt you moderns have more advanced methods."

"I seem to remember something like that in biology," the social worker said weakly.

"The Colonel's fluid preserves this attribute, you see—at least for a long time. It's based on formaldehyde like the old fluid, but it contains vitamins and proteins in solution, and oxygenators, and ever so many other things. You may have smelled the formaldehyde the first time

you met Papa, but no doubt you thought it was after shave lotion."

"I think I must be going." The social worker looked around vaguely for her bag.

The old woman smiled. "Oh no, not yet. I'll be leaving myself soon. Papa had stomach cramps—did I tell you that? Just like Frank, who used to come around for the gas company. That's funny, isn't it: stomach cramps and the gas company." There was a knock at the door and the old woman called, "Not now, Frank. We're talking."

"He can think?"

"Oh yes." The old woman rocked back and forth. "Think and talk. The standing ones are put on a platform with the extra equipment in it so they can move about, while the seated ones just have it built into their chairs. Now Kitty here," she leaned over and stroked the cat, "was a special job just for me, and the extra equipment is let into the floor under her; but they don't often do animals."

"If they can think and move," the social worker asked, "how is it different from being alive?" She answered her own question. "Alive, but crippled perhaps, like someone who has to use a wheel chair."

"Now you've hit it," the old woman said. She was putting away her knitting. "It's the memory, my dear. You see, the moment-to-moment memories a person has are electrical, as you might say, in their nature. But the permanent ones, the things a person recalls more than just five or ten minutes, are due to changes in the molecules that make up one's brain. With the Packerhaus method, since the brain isn't alive it can't change itself that way." She waved a hand, pleased with her explanation. "That's why Papa can't remember that he can't smoke, for example."

"Stomach cramps."

"Yes, just like you. Col. Packerhaus had them too, but though I do love having people around me I don't have him here, of course. The company has him down in the

lobby of the Packerhaus Mortuary Number One where the bereaved can talk to him. He's still quite a good salesman, you know, and very comforting." The old woman stood up, stowing the knitting under her rocker. "It's interesting, too, to see how long his memory span is; it seems to improve with age. I was about to say that it almost seemed his brain had learned to make the moment-to-moment kind last longer—but that would be silly, wouldn't it? I mean since after the resin hardens it can't learn at all. But you'll see for yourself."

"I want to go home," the social worker said.

"You can't, dear," the old woman told her gently. "But it was nice of you to come around to visit an old lady." She bent quickly and kissed the social worker on the forehead. "And," she added when she had straightened up again, "I have some lovely news for you: when I go myself I'm going to have it done too. It's all in my will. Then we can just sit and talk all the time. You and I and Papa, and of course Frank, when Frank wants to talk. And the new girl they're sending to look in on me. There's a note on the outside front door, but if you remember you might tell her that there's a cup set out for her with a tea bag already in it, and hot water on the stove. I have to go to the store, but I'll be back soon."

"Meow," said the cat.

The social worker leaned forward to stroke it, but found she could not leave her chair. The clock ticked. A slow horror filled her, and there was an agonizing tightness in her throat. She should be crying, she knew; but there was no moisture in her eyes.

One of the front doors opened and a man in uniform rapped gently on the varnished frame. "Meter reader, lady."

"You're Frank, aren't you?" The clock ticked.

The other front door opened and a new social worker came in. She looked the part, with brown, sensible hair, round-lensed glasses and large, kind, short eyes.

"You have short eyes," the social worker said.

The new social worker smiled. "Short sighted, you mean. Yes, that's why I have to wear these awful things." She tapped her glasses with a forefinger.

"Meow," said the cat.

"I'm the meter reader," said Frank. "Sometimes I look in too; old people get lonely you know."

"Charmed," said the new social worker. "I do hope you folks don't mind my barging in like this. There was a note on the door saying I'd find tea on the stove. I didn't realize the old lady already had company." She went into the kitchen.

"You're very kind, aren't you?" the social worker said to Frank. The clock ticked.

The new social worker came back, carrying a cup of tea and smiling. "There's an elderly gentleman in the kitchen," she said. "He's cursing his cigar."

The social worker dropped Frank's hand. "I was either to tell you to drink that tea, or not to drink it; but I can't recall which. And he's behind you."

"Oh?" said the new social worker, and turned around.

Grandfather had followed her from the kitchen, and he asked the new social worker for a light for his cigar. "I've been trying to light it from the stove," he complained, "but it won't draw."

The clock ticked.

"Meow," said the cat.

"That cat's shedding," said the new social worker. "In fact I don't think I've ever seen a cat shedding quite so much. The hair's coming out of her in quite a remarkable way."

The clock ticked.

The clock ticked.

The clock ticked.

"Ah," said the old woman. "All my little circle gathered together. Did the new girl come?"

"New girl?" asked the social worker. There was a gagging sound from another room.

"I think she must have gone into a bedroom to lie down," said the old woman. "Perhaps she has gas."

"I thought it was the plumbing," said Grandfather.

"We have news for you," said the social worker. "Good news, I hope, though it means I won't be coming to see you any more—at least not in an official capacity."

The old woman was getting out her knitting. "Wonderful," she said.

"Meow," said the cat.

"Frank and I are getting married. We wanted you to be the first to know." The social worker sat primly, knees together, hands in lap.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the old woman. "Marvelous! Of course," she added in a more serious tone, "you know what this means. We'll have to invite the minister—for tea."

"Come on," said Grandfather, taking Frank by the elbow. "We'd best leave these women to plan the wedding. Got a match on you?"

The social worker gulped. "They don't walk," she said. "Frank was riding on a sort of little cart. Haven't I noticed that before?"

"It's the Packerhaus method," the old woman said. "Perhaps you've heard of it?"

"Mmmh," the social worker replied, looking troubled.

"Meow," said the cat.

The touch of far space . . . the memories of man.

THE WATER SCULPTOR OF STATION 233

George Zebrowski

Sitting there, watching the Earth below him from the panel of Station Six, Christian Praeger suddenly felt embarrassed by the planet's beauty. For the last eight hours he had watched the great storm develop in the Pacific, and he had wanted to share the view with someone, tell someone how beautiful he thought it was. He had told it to himself now for the fiftieth time.

The storm was a physical evil, a spinning hell that might with luck reach the Asian mainland and kill thousands of starving billions. They would get a warning, for all the good that would do. Since the turn of the century there had been dozens of such storms, developing in places way off from the traditional storm cradles.

He looked at the delicate pinwheel. It was a part of the planet's ecology—whatever state that was in now. The arms of the storm reminded him of the theory which held the galaxy to be a kind of organized storm system which sucked in gas and dust at its center and sent it all out into the vast arms to condense into stars. And the stars were stormy laboratories building the stuff of the universe in the direction of huge molecules, from the inanimate and crystalline to the living and conscious. In the slowness of time it all looked stable, Praeger thought, but almost certainly all storms run down and die.

He looked at the clock above the center screen. There were six clocks around the watch room, one above each

screen. The clock on the ceiling gave station time. His watch would be over in half an hour.

He looked at the sun screen. There all the dangerous rays were filtered out. He turned up the electronic magnification and for a long time watched the prominences flare up and die. He looked at the cancerous sunspots. The sight was hypnotic and frightening no matter how many times he had seen it. He put his hand out to the computer panel and punched in the routine information. Then he looked at the spectroscopic screens, small rectangles beneath the earth watch monitors. He checked the time, and set the automatic release for the ozone scatter-cannisters to be dropped into the atmosphere. A few minutes later he watched them drop away from the station, following their fall until they broke in the upper atmosphere, releasing the precious ozone that would protect Earth's masses from the sun's deadly radiation. Early in the twentieth century a good deal of the natural ozone layer in the upper atmosphere had been stripped away as a result of atomic testing, resulting in much genetic damage in the late eighties and nineties. But soon now the ozone layer would be back up to snuff.

When his watch ended ten minutes later, Praeger was glad to get away from the visual barrage of the screens. He made his way into one of the jutting spokes of the station where his sleep cubicle was located. Here it was a comfortable half-g all the time. He settled himself into his bunk, and pushed the music button at his side, leaving his small observation and com screen on the ceiling turned off. Gradually the music seemed to fill the room and he closed his eyes. Mahler's weary song of earth's misery enveloped his consciousness with pity and weariness, and love. Before he fell asleep he wished he might feel the earth's atmosphere the way he felt his own skin.

I wish I could hear and feel the motion of gas molecules in the upper air, the whisperings of subtle energy transfers . . .

In the Pacific, weather control engineers guided the

great storm into an electrostatic basket. The storm would provide usable power for the rest of its natural life.

Praeger awoke a quarter of an hour before his watch was due to begin. He thought of his recent vacation earthside, remembering the glowing volcano he had seen in Italy, and how strange the silver shield of the Moon had looked from behind all the atmosphere. He remembered watching his own station six, his post in life, moving slowly across the sky; remembered one of the inner stations as it passed Julian's station 233, one of the few private satellites, synchronous, fixed for all time over one point on the earth. He should be able to talk to Julian soon, during his next off period. Even though Julian was an artist and a recluse, a water sculptor as he called himself, Julian and he were very much alike. At times he felt they were each other's conscience, two ex-spacemen in continual retreat from their home world. It was much more beautiful, and bearable from out here. In all this silence he sometimes thought he could hear the universe breathing. It was alive, the whole starry cosmos thobbing.

If I could tear a hole in its body, it would bleed and cry out for a Bandaid . . .

He remembered the stifling milieu of Rome's streets: the great screens which went dead during his vacation, blinding the city, the crowds waiting on the stainless steel squares for the music to resume over the giant audios. They could not work without it. The music pounded its monotonous base beat: the sound of some imprisoned beast beneath the city. The cab which waited for him was a welcome sight: an instrument for fleeing.

In the shuttle craft which brought him back to station six he read the little quotation printed on the back of every seat for the 10,000th time; it told him that the shuttle dated back to the building of the giant earth station system.

“. . . What we are building now is the nervous system

of mankind . . . the communications network of which the satellites will be the nodal points. They will enable the consciousness of our grandchildren to flicker like lightning back and forth across the face of the planet . . .”

Praeger got up from his bunk and made his way back to the watch room. He was glad now to get away from his own thoughts and return to the visual stimulation of the watch screens. Soon he would be talking to Julian again; they would share each other's friendship in the universe of the spoken word as they shared a silent past every time they looked at each other across the void.

Julian's large green eyes reminded him each time of the view out by Neptune, the awesome size of the sea green giant, the ship outlined against it, and the fuel tank near it blossoming into a red rose, silently; the first ship had been torn in half. Julian had been in space, coming over to Praeger's command ship when it happened, to pick up a spare part for the radio-telescope. *They* blamed Julian because *they* had to blame someone. After all, he had been in command. Chances were that something had already gone wrong, and that nothing could have stopped it; and only one man had been lost.

Julian and Praeger were barred from taking any more missions, unfairly, they thought. There were none coming up that either of them would have been interested in anyway, but at the time they put up a fight. Some fool official said publicly that they were unfit to represent mankind beyond the solar system—a silly thing to say, especially when the UN had just put a ban on extra-solar activities. They were threatened with dishonorable discharges, but they were world heroes; the publicity would have been embarrassing.

Julian believed that most of mankind was unfit for just about everything. With his small fortune and the backing of patrons he built his bubble station, number 233 in the registry; his occupation now was “sculptor,” and the tax people came to talk to him every year. To Julian Earth

was a mudball, where ten per cent of the people lived off the labor of the other ninety percent. Oh, the brave ones shine, he told Praeger once, but the initiative that should have taken men to the stars had been ripped out of men's hearts. The whole star system was rotting, overblown with grasping things living in their own wastes. The promise of ancient myths, three thousand years old, had not been fulfilled . . .

In the watch room Praeger watched the delicate clouds which enveloped the earth. He could feel the silence, and the slowness of the changing patterns was reassuring. Given time and left alone, the air would clear itself of all man-made wastes, the rivers would run clear again, and the oceans would regain their abundance of living things.

When his watch was over he did not wait for his relief to come. He didn't like the man. The feeling was mutual and by leaving early they could each avoid the other as much as was possible. Praeger went directly to his cubicle, lay down on his bunk, and opened the channel, both audio and visual, on the ceiling com and observation screen.

Julian's face came on promptly on the hour.

"EW-CX233 here," Julian said.

"EW-CX066," Praeger said. Julian looked his usual pale self, green eyes with the look of other time still in them. "Hello, Julian. What have you been doing?"

"There was a reporter here. I made a tape of the whole thing, if you can call it an interview. Want to hear it?"

"Go ahead. My vacation was the usual. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Julian's face disappeared and the expressionless face of the reporter appeared. The face smiled just before it spoke.

"Julian—that's the name you are known by?"

"Yes."

"Will you describe your work for our viewers, Julian?"

"I am a water sculptor. I make thin plastic molds and fill them with water. Then I put them out into the void and when they solidify I go out and strip off the plastic. You can see most of my work orbiting my home."

"Isn't the use of water expensive?"

"I re-use much of it. And I am independently wealthy."

"What's the point of leaving your work outside?"

"On Earth the wind shapes rock. Here space dust shapes the ice, mutilates it, and I get the effect I want. Then I photograph the results in color, and make more permanent versions here inside."

Praeger watched Julian and the reporter float over to a large tank of water.

"Inside here," Julian said, "you see the permanent figures. When I spin the tank the density of each becomes apparent, and each takes its proper place in the suspension."

"Do you ever work with realistic subjects?"

"No."

"Do you think you could make a likeness of the Earth?"

"Why?" Praeger saw Julian smile politely. The reporter suddenly looked uncomfortable. The tape ended and Julian's face appeared.

"See what they send up here to torment me?"

"Is the interview going to be used anywhere?" Praeger asked.

"They were vague about it."

"Have you been happy?"

Julian didn't answer. For a few moments both screens were still portraits. Both men knew all the old complaints, all the old pains. Both knew that the UN was doing secret extra-solar work, and they both knew that it was the kind of work that would revive them, just as it might give the Earth a new lease on life. But they would never have a share of it. Only a few more years of routine service, Praeger knew, and then retirement—to what? To a crowded planet.

Both men thought the same thought at that moment—the promise of space was dead, unless men moved from the solar system.

“Julian,” Praeger said softly, “I’ll call you after my next watch. Julian nodded and the screen turned gray.

On impulse Praeger pushed the observation button for a look at station 233. It was a steel and plastic ball one hundred feet in diameter. Praeger knew that most of Julian’s belongings floated in the empty center, tied together with line. When he needed something he would bounce around the tiny universe of objects until he found it. Some parts of the station were transparent. Praeger remembered peering out once to catch sight of one of Julian’s ice sculptures. He saw a pale white ghost peering in back at him for a moment, and then passing.

Praeger watched the silent ball that housed his friend of a lifetime. Eventually, he knew, he would join Julian in his retirement. A man could live a long time in zero-g.

The alarm in his cubicle rang and Higgins’ voice came over the audio. “That fool! Doesn’t he see that orbital debris coming toward him?”

Praeger had perhaps ten seconds left to see station 233 whole. The orbital junk hit hard and the air was gone into the void. The water inside, Praeger knew, froze instantly. Somewhere inside the ruptured body of Julian floated among his possessions even as the lights on the station winked out.

Praeger was getting into his suit, knowing there was no chance to save Julian. He made his way down the emergency passage from his cubicle, futilely dragging the spare suit behind him.

The airlock took an age to cycle. When it opened he gave a great kick with his feet and launched himself out toward the other station. Slowly it grew in front of him, until he was at the airlock. He activated the mechanism and when the locks were both open he pushed himself in toward the center of the little world.

Starlight illuminated Julian’s white, ruptured face.

Through the clear portion of the station Praeger saw the earth's shadow eclipse the full moon: a bronze shield.

For a long time after Praeger drifted in the starlit shell. He stared at the dark side of the earth, at the cities sparkling like fireflies; never sleeping, billions living in metal caves; keeping time with the twenty-four hour workday; and where by night the mannequins danced beneath the flickering screens, their blood filled with strange potions which would give them their small share of counterfeit happiness.

Praeger tried to brush away the tears floating inside his helmet, but with no success. They would have to wait until he took his suit off. When the emergency crew arrived an hour later, he took charge.

The station was a hazard now and would have to be removed. He agreed. All this would be a funeral rite for Julian, he thought, and he was sure the artist would approve.

He removed all of Julian's written material and sent it down to his publishers, then put Julian's body in a plastic sack and secured it to the north pole of the station bubble.

He left the sculptures inside. On the body Praeger found a small note:

When we grow up we'll see the earth not as a special place, just one place. Then home will be the starry cosmos. Of course this has always been the case. It is we who will have changed. I have nothing else to hope for.

The hulk continued in its orbit for three weeks, until Praeger sent a demolition crew out to it and blew it out of existence. He watched on the monitor as they set the charges that would send it into a new orbit. Station 233 would leave the solar system at an almost ninety degree angle to the plane of the ecliptic on a parabolic path which would not bring it back to Sol for thousands of

years. It would make a dandy comet someday, Praeger thought.

He watched the charges flare up, burn for thirty seconds, and die. Slowly the bubble moved off toward the top of the screen. He watched it until it disappeared from the screen. In twenty-four hours it would be beyond the boundaries of Earth. Interstellar gas and dust would scar it out of all recognition: a seed on the wind.

3 Fables: Two

Top Secret

Perusal by Unauthorized Personnel
Strictly Prohibited
Penalties as described by Law

OPERATION P-BUTTON

Gordon R. Dickson

Subject: Altitudinal Readjustment of Ceiling Quanta

Documents: Documents are enclosed.

Number of Documents: One.

Nature of Document #1. Communication received from
Operations Sector Officer,
Sector 19, H. E. Penny.

Relevant Facts: Communication received by Courier:
Most Special and Most Urgent—at 0800
hours Eastern Daylight Time, 5/1/76.
Receiving office, Operation P-Button
HQ.

Document #1

FROM: OPERATIONS SECTOR OFFICER, SEC-
TOR 19, H. E. PENNY 4/27/76

TO: CHIEF, OPERATION P-BUTTON.

SUBJECT: REPORT RECEIVED FROM SECTOR
FIELD AGENT C. N. LITTLE, THIS
DATE, 0600 HOURS

SIR:

FIELD AGENT CHARLES (CHICK) N. LITTLE
REPORTS AN INCIDENT OF OCCIPITAL IM-
PACT, 0500 HOURS, THIS DATE.

ALL OBSERVATIONS AND PERTINENT DATA
THIS SECTOR OF OPERATIONS STRONGLY IN-
DICATE THAT THE SKY IS FALLING.

REPEAT: ALL OBSERVATIONS AND PERTI-
NENT DATA THIS SECTOR STRONGLY INDI-
CATE THAT THE SKY IS FALLING.

MOST URGENT ALL POTENTIALLY AFFECT-
ED AGENCIES AND PERSONNEL BE INFORMED
WITHOUT DELAY.

RESPECTFULLY:

SIGNED: HENN E. PENNY

HENNINGTON E. PENNY, OP:SEC:OFF.

Miriam Allen deFord is science fiction's only active octogenarian. May it turn out that she has discovered the secret of immortality, so that we may look forward to many more years and many more stories such as . . .

THE TIGER

Miriam Allen deFord

It wasn't even a carnival or a circus—just one flat car with a huge tent erected over it, down by the old railroad tracks. It must have come in late Friday night, for it was there early Saturday morning when the first farmers from the country around came for the Saturday market.

The big sign in front, painted in orange and black, said:

The only tame man-eating
TIGER

In captivity!

So tame YOU can come right in his CAGE! !

Come one, come all

50¢ admission including visit in CAGE

With Earth's only domesticated BENGAL TIGER! ! !

Bart Holland had come to town with his uncle in the truck. When they'd sold out the peas and tomatoes and corn, he'd be free for the rest of the day, with money in his pocket to spend. He could hike back, or maybe somebody would give him a lift; this was his day and he'd saved up for it. In the back of his mind was the thought of a girl—no special girl, and none of the pick-ups in the park—but a sort of dream-girl: pretty and friendly, a town girl instead of the hicks around home, but nice.

And he'd hardly pulled out the tail-gate of the truck and arranged the crates on it for the first customers, while his uncle wandered over for a smoke and a chat

with some of the other market people, when he saw her.

She was standing outside the tent, but not reading the sign or anything, just standing as if she were enjoying the sunshine. Her face had the bright curiosity of a stranger in a new place. She was small and rather pale, with dark hair falling around her shoulders, and there was something odd about her clothing, but Bart couldn't determine what; it was becoming, anyway, and she was very pretty.

He couldn't keep from staring, and his eyes drew hers and she smiled. Girls did smile often at the lean six-foot boy with his mop of yellow hair and good strong face, but that was usually as far as they got; he was too shy to do more than smile back. Today was going to be different; he had made up his mind to that. With his heart fluttering a little he strolled over to her.

"Nice day," he ventured. He had to clear his throat before the words came out.

"Oh, yes," she piped, in a fluting voice. "Does your . . . does the sun always shine like this here?"

"Not always," he answered, wondering where she had come from that she didn't know it rained only too often on summer Saturdays. "But we're having a good summer."

"What are you and the man going to do with all those plants?" she asked, gesturing toward the truck.

Bart laughed; he couldn't help it. She wasn't a town girl, she was a big city girl, who probably thought fruit and vegetables grew in cellophane bags in supermarkets.

"He's my uncle," he said. "Saturday's market day; people from town will be along soon to buy the stuff. We come in every week. My uncle's farm is about five miles from here."

"Oh." She glanced back at the tent, a sort of cautious glance, and Bart realized that she must be with the show.

"Is that true?" he asked, "About the tiger? I've been to lots of circuses, and I've seen trained lions and tigers, but not even the trainer would get into the cage with one of them—not without a protection."

"Oh, yes, My—the trainer and I go in all the time; we even leave the door open sometimes, but he never comes out. And anyone who pays to come in is welcome to go in the cage too, and see him close to and even pat him; he doesn't mind."

"Is he just a cub? Did you raise him from a baby?"

"Oh, no, he's full grown—ten feet long. And we bought him from a zoo, a year ago. He wasn't born there, though; he was captured in the jungle."

"And you mean that in a year you've tamed a full-grown tiger so that anybody can come near to him and touch him?"

"Oh, yes. We—the trainer has a method. He can tame any animal on the planet."

"This I've got to see. Will you be here all day?"

"All day till we move on tonight."

"Well, I have to stay here and help my uncle, but by the end of the afternoon we'll be through and I can do what I like. If I—if I come in then, will I be seeing you?"

She laughed.

"You'll see me before then," she said. "And hear me. When there are enough people, I sell the tickets and do the—what do call it—announcing?"

"Barking—so you're a lady barker. I never saw one before." He gulped. "Would—would there be any time after that when you're free?"

"Free? I am always free."

"I mean, when you'd have time off, so we could . . . I mean if you wanted to, we could go somewhere and have a soda or something together, and . . . and talk."

"I must be here all the time, but there are times when I can come outside, like now. Then we could talk." She smiled again, and Bart felt his pulse throbbing. "You are the first human being I have seen that I have liked."

Bart felt himself reddening. She must be some kind of foreigner, whose English was insecure. It wasn't probable that in her entire life—she must be about 18 to his 20, he figured—a chance-met farm boy was the first person she

had ever liked! But a little shiver of happiness ran through him.

"Thanks," he muttered. "I like you too, lots."

"The man—your uncle is calling you," she said.

He turned and waved as he ran back to the truck, but she had already slipped into the tent.

"Got you a girl friend, huh?" his uncle greeted him with a grin. "Hold on to your wallet, sonny—them fly-by night show folks are death on a kid with a dollar on 'em."

Bart was surprised at the surge of rage that shook him. he was too angry to speak. He turned his back. His uncle guffawed.

It was a busy market day, but as Bart weighed and made change and filled bags he never lost sight of the tent across the way. About ten o'clock he saw the girl come out again. A man whose face he could not make out followed her, carrying a little ticket booth of light wood, which he set up a few feet in front. He went in again, and came out with a roll of tickets and a cashbox and a chair. By this time curious people—Bart had seen them earlier, gazing at the tent and reading the sign—had gathered around, and the girl began her spiel. There was too much noise and he was too busy to hear much of it, just the word "tiger" and an occasional phrase of description or invitation. Once he heard her say: "Ten at a time only please. That is all the tent will hold." People began to drift in and after a while they came out again to make room for others.

Their neighbor at home, Jim Stutz, was one of them. He came over to the truck and greeted them as they sat on the tail-gate eating the lunch Bart's aunt had packed for them.

"How about it, Jim?" his uncle inquired. "Is it on the level? Did you go in the cage?"

"Sure did," Stutz said. "It's amazin'. Great big cat, and I run my finger right down one of his stripes and he just purred—sounded like a tractor engine. Most of them's

afraid to go inside the cage—they just stand around and watch. The feller that owns him has to pick men from the audience and ask them if they want to come on up. Most of them back down."

"No women or kids?"

"Oh, yeah, there was one woman went up—a big woman looked like a school teacher. There weren't many kids there—who's goin' to pay a half dollar to let a kid see a tiger?"

Bart listened with half an ear. He was keeping busy between bites of lunch, in a hurry to get through and see his uncle off the premises. After they'd sold out his uncle would leave, and then maybe the girl would have a few minutes free and he could join her.

But it was past five when they'd cleared out the last of their produce and his uncle was ready to call it a day. He put away the crates and closed the tail-gate.

"I'm off for a beer or two with the fellers and to do your aunt's shopping, then I aim to get home before dark," he said. "You sure you'll get a ride? Don't come home too late, now; your aunt worries."

"I'll be all right," said Bart. There had been little conversation between the two of them all day. "Aren't you going to see the tiger first?"

"Who me? I got no money to waste on fake shows. You go waste yours and you can tell me about it afterwards. And don't run away with that girl!" he added with a grin. Bart disdained to reply.

She was sitting in the ticket booth when he walked over, but people were wandering away with the supper hour and she had nobody to spiel to. How did they light the tent for the night show, he wondered: they must have some sort of lighting arrangements inside and outside. Probably they traveled by train, and the rest of the gear was in a railroad car over in the freight yard somewhere.

"Is there anybody left in the tent?" he asked as he came up to her.

"Only my . . . no, no customers. They will be coming

again, after they have eaten. We have been to many small towns, and always that is the way it is. Do you always eat when the sun goes down?"

"Sure, don't you?"

"We have different hours."

"Couldn't you get off now and go downtown and have something with me?"

"We have our own food. We cannot—what is the word?—we cannot assimilate yours."

"I see." He felt vaguely offended. But she smiled her radiant smile and he forgave her city snobbishness. "Then can I go in and see the tiger now?"

"No, he is not there," she said sharply.

"Not there?" The tiger certainly was not visible anywhere else.

She seemed confused. "I mean, he is not on display. He must have his rest, like everyone else. When the people come again, then you can go in too. And you must not pay; for you it is free, because I like you."

"Why, thanks." He wished his uncle had heard that.

She came out of the booth and sat down on the grass in front of the tent. She plucked a blade of grass and looked at it as if she had never noticed grass before.

"Come and sit with me," she said, "and let us talk."

Bart was hungry—he'd eaten nothing since noon—but this was more important, and he squatted down beside her. If only there were some way he could persuade her to remain behind when the trainer—what was he? her father?—and the tiger left that night! If only he were independent, and more than 20, and on his own!

Her eyes searched him gravely from head to feet.

"Tell me," she said, "are there many here like you, tall and beautiful?"

"Oh, gosh!" His face burned. "You don't call a man beautiful, honey—and I'm not even good-looking. My aunt says I'm a string bean with a corn tassel on top!"

"I think you are beautiful. We have not been very fortunate on this tour. We have seen so few like you.

Are there others here? They have not come into the tent today."

"Plenty better-looking than I am."

"And females to? And young ones?"

"Why, sure," he laughed uncomfortably. But no girls prettier than she was, he thought. "Most people look all right while they're young and healthy, don't they? Let's talk about something else. Do you know we don't even know each other's names? I'm Bart Holland."

"I am—you can call me that name you just said—Hunney. I liked it."

"All right, if you don't want to tell me your own name."

"You could not pronounce it."

He'd been right; she was some sort of foreigner.

"Tell me," she said. "What is your life? Do you live in a group—a family?"

"I live with my aunt and uncle. My parents are dead."

"Dead before you? How could that be?"

"It often happens." He looked at her curiously. She seemed embarrassed.

"Never mind that," she said. "Do you do work?"

"I help my uncle on the farm—full time since I graduated from high school two years ago. But if I can manage it, I want to go to agricultural school next year."

"And you enjoy that life?"

"Very much."

She was silent for a long time. Then she said abruptly: "Eat now, since it is your time, and come back. I too must rest. Can you do that?"

"Sure, as long as I don't get home very late, and worry my aunt."

"She likes you?"

"They're both very good to me. She was my mother's twin sister."

"Twinsister: what is that?"

"They were both born at the same time. Haven't you ever heard of twins?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she said hurriedly. She was certainly a strange girl—but an awfully attractive one.

Bart got a hamburger downtown and came back to the railroad tracks. It was almost dark, and outside the tent were two tall poles with flaming torches on their tops. There were a dozen or so people in front of the tent, and the girl was giving her spiel again. When she saw him, she beckoned, slipped a ticket into his hand, and waved him toward the opening.

The tent was very big, and it was well-lighted, though Bart could not make out the source of the light. In its middle stood the large cage, its door open, and the tiger inside of it. He was certainly a big one. He seemed to be asleep; he was lying with his eyes closed and his tail curled under him.

The man who took Bart's ticket must be the trainer himself, for no others were in sight except two men and a woman who stood near the cage staring at the tiger. Like the girl, the trainer was small and slim and dark; they were obviously related, and Bart felt better somehow to come to that conclusion. He joined the three customers already there. So far as he could observe, the tiger was a perfectly normal animal, except for a lack of the ferocity and nervous restlessness he had come to take for granted in caged wild beasts. He wondered if perhaps the trainer's "method" was not simply dope.

Outside he could hear the girl giving her spiel. By ones and couples, six more men and women trickled in, and then she stopped talking and the man left his post by the opening and walked up to the cage.

He held up his hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began hesitantly. Bart noted his strange accent, though he could not make out what it was. Apparently he was much less clever at foreign tongues than the girl was.

"The Bengal tiger is one of the fiercest and most untamable of all wild animals. This specimen was captured in the jungle when he was young, and bought from a zoo

only a year ago. Now I am going to show you how gentle he is."

He climbed through the cage door and picked up one of the paws of the sleeping tiger. The tiger opened his eyes, but made no attempt to move. The man seized the tiger's ears and jiggled them. "Wake up," he said. "You have company."

The tiger yawned, stretched, and rose. He was twice the length of the man, and his head was almost to the man's chest as he rubbed himself against the slender trainer like an affectionate cat. He purred, and the vibration shook the bars of the cage.

The trainer played with him as if he were a kitten. The tiger did no tricks, but he rolled over spontaneously and presented a white furry belly to be scatched. He licked the man's gloved hand—"I wear gloves because his tongue is rough," the trainer explained—and when the man inserted his whole arm into the tiger's open mouth the beast made not attempt to close his jaws, but merely stood patiently, looking bored, until the arm was taken out again. Bart noted that the sharp teeth were all there.

"Now," said the man with a smile, "who would like to come up with me into the cage and play with my pet as I have done?" He pointed to a young man and a girl who stood holding hands. "You, sir? And you madam?"

The man shook his head, but the girl giggled and pulled him forward. "Come on, scairdy cat," she laughed. "Who's afraid of the big bad tiger?" She climbed into the cage, and, shamefaced, the man followed her.

Bart watched, fascinated, as they patted the complacent animal and stroked his head. Emboldened, the girl tweaked his tail. The tiger only yawned.

"Who else will come, then?" the trainer called. Bart glanced around him. Behind him stood two men from town he recognized by sight, though he did not know their names. Egging each other on, then they too climbed in.

"Let me go, ma," whined a voice near by. A boy of

about fifteen was wriggling away from his mother's grasp. "Not without me," she said firmly. They marched in together, amid laughter. The mother looked frightened, and refused to touch the tiger; the boy threw his arms cockily around the tiger's head and the beast licked his hair.

As the boy let him go the tiger trotted up to the trainer and muzzled him. The trainer patted the animal's head and walked to the front of the cage.

"He is telling me he likes company, but he is getting tired," he said. "We will make this the last showing to-night. But there is time for one more to come up and meet him, and then we shall say goodnight to you all. How about you, my young man? Do you not wish to stroke the pretty tiger?"

"Sure, why not?" said Bart. He had been too shy to volunteer, but he had been hoping all along that the trainer would single him out and invite him. He started forward.

Suddenly a hand caught his. Unseen by him, the girl had come into the tent. She must have been standing behind him.

"Come up with me, Honey," he said. He glanced at the trainer and was startled. The man had directed a look of violent anger at them. Perhaps she wasn't supposed to go into the cage with customers. He dropped her hand, embarrassed. She seized his again. Imperceptibly she shook her head; he could barely hear what she was murmuring.

"No. Do not go there. I beg of you."

Bart hesitated. Looking directly at the girl, the man called out something in a strange harsh language. The girl turned very white. Her eyes filled with tears. She answered in a few words in the same tongue, her tone full of emotion. The trainer made a gesture of despair. Even the tiger, Bart could swear, looked amazed!

Everybody was staring at them. The girl tugged at his hand. "Come out with me," she whispered urgently. "Be quick. I will explain."

Red-faced, dreading a scene, Bart followed her outside. He heard laughter behind him. She ran across the grass to the shelter of a shack beside the near-by freight yard. Even in the darkness he could see, as he joined her, the pallor of her face and the glitter of tears in her eyes.

"What on earth?" he burst out. "You said the tiger was tame—you made me look a coward in front of all those people. What's this all about?"

"Not now," she said tightly. "Wait. Look. Watch."

In a minute an elderly man and two middle-aged women emerged from the tent and walked across the tracks to their waiting cars—all the audience besides himself who had not gone into the cage. Evidently the show was closing and they had been asked to leave first. There was no sign of the young couple, the two men, or the mother and son.

That meant that soon Honey must leave too. She would go away with the show, and he would never see her again. He did not even know her name, or how to find her after she had gone. His anger dropped from him; he looked at the silent girl, his heart full.

"Watch," she said again. Bart waited for the rest of the visitors to leave. At least there would be a minute then to say goodbye, time perhaps for a first and last kiss. He stared impatiently at the tent.

And then in an instant it wasn't there.

Torches, ticket booth, tent, the trainer, the tiger, the people in the cage, simply ceased to be. There was nothing before his eyes but the grassy field beside the railroad tracks.

Bewildered, aghast, he turned to the girl.

"I could not let you," she said through stiff lips "I had to save you . . . how could it happen? In one day, I come to like you, as if you were one of my own kind."

"I don't—where have they gone?"

"Where we go always—to another town. It is the way we travel. But first they—those in the cage with . . . my father and the tiger—they will be delivered to the portal and taken away."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," she said gently. "I will try to explain, and then you must leave me at once. I do not ask you not to repeat this—nobody would believe you; they would think you were crazed."

"There will be six people missing forever, who will never be found. They will question us and search us—they always do—but they will find nothing and learn nothing. If searchers become dangerous to us, we shall disappear immediately, for good."

"You mean . . . those people will be *killed*?"

"Of course not; they will live a long time, we hope, where they are taken. It is very like their own home. We are collectors."

"Collectors?"

"For a . . . for something like what you call a zoo, such as we pretend we bought the tiger from. You have them for strange creatures from far places; so do we, but from still farther ones. They will be well cared for. But of course they can never come back."

"You and your father are making this . . . collection?" If he had not seen, he would have been certain that the girl must be a lunatic.

"No, we are only employees. We work for . . . for him you call the tiger."

"The tiger?"

"Yes," she said softly. "That is our proper shape."

"We cannot keep long in yours, when our employer sees that we are tired, he gives the signal for the last show. I did not think that one would be the last, or I would not have risked your entering, but my father is not young any longer and sometimes he tires soon."

"If anyone had ever imagined that one of us could fall into liking with a being from an alien world! I shall be sent home now, and I shall be punished."

Bart's head was whirling.

"Honey!" he cried, his arms out for her. She drew away.

"No, my dear one." The tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I cannot vanish in our way unless I too am in the tent. I must find them, no matter how they punish me at home I could not live here like one of you.

"I cannot last much longer in this form tonight. Go . . . please go. Go at once."

Her whole body shuddered. Speechless, Bart gazed at her. His legs would not obey him; he could not stir.

There was a gasp and a shimmer.

In the moonlight a young tiger sped swiftly away across the fields.

R. A. Lafferty made his permanent mark on science fiction with the appearance of his first novel, Past Master. In this touching (in more than one sense) tale of a far tomorrow, he proves that the old ways . . . and the old cons . . . are frequently best . . .



HANDS OF THE MAN

R. A. Lafferty

His forearms were like a lion's, sinewed and corded and mountainous. One could hardly help looking at them, and he was looking at them himself. His hands, no less remarkable than his forearms, lay palm-up on the bar.

The hands of the man were intricately and powerfully fashioned; on one of the lesser fingers of the left hand there was a heavy gold band three-quarters of an inch thick, and wide. The rest of him was a stocky skyman, fair and freckled. He was blue-eyed and lightly lashed and browed, and he gazed at his hands like a boy.

It was a tavern frequented by skymen and traveling men of all sorts. A spotter had seen the man; and now he came and they talked.

"You are very interested in something," said the spotter Henry Hazelman.

"Not at all," the skyman said. "A man who is deeply interested has the same appearance as one who is completely absent-minded, as was my case. I was staring at my hands, and both they and my mind were empty. But before I had left off thinking, I was musing on the contrast between the two of them."

The skyman was named Hodl Oskanian, and the name was the least odd thing about him.

"I was looking at my left hand which I was born with," continued Hodl, "and at my right hand which I

made myself. It is the saying of the palmists that we form the lines of our right hand by the tide of our lives.

"You will notice, my friend, that all the lines of my left hand are graven so deeply that a coin could be stood up in any of them when the hand is flat. Get a hold on your emotions, man, and then look at that Head Line! Should it not betoken genius! You would say that a man with a Head Line like that would be capable of anything, and you would be right. Hold onto your eyeballs with both hands when you take a look at that Heart Line! Notice the Generosity Passage where it goes between the Mountains of Integrity and Nobility. Doesn't it shake you a little to stand beside a man with a Heart Line like that?"

"Yes, something does shake me a little," Henry Hazelman said.

"Look at that Humility Bump!" Hodl all but sang. "I'll bet I've got more humility than any man in creation! If I ever met a man with a hand like mine I'd follow him to the end of the universes just to shake it. Steady yourself now, friend. Look at that Life Line! It curves clear around the heel of my hand like the Ocean-River circling the ancient world. I couldn't die at less than a hundred and twenty with a Life Line like that."

"Yes, it is quite a hand," said Henry Hazelman.

"But not the right hand," said Hodl. "Notice that, while it also is one of the most fascinating hands in the worlds, it is not up to the left which I was born with. It is the hand of a compromised genius. Is there any other kind? It is like the hand of a Leonardo or an Aquinas or an Eoin Dinneen or an Aristotle or a Willy McGilly--the hand of a man capable of reaching the ultimates, but perhaps not of surpassing them. This comparative fuzziness of line is to be found in the right hands of all really great men. Even we fall short of our destiny. Have you the price of a beer?"

"Yes, here, give my friend a beer," Henry cried to the bar-man. It was the green beer recently introduced from

Barathron, and it had become a favorite of the skymen.

And when the left hand of Hodl flicked out to take the beer, Henry Hazelman saw what he had been waiting to see. He went away.

Henry went to David Daumier the diamond factor.

"It's as big as a hen's egg, David, my word on it," Henry was insisting.

"To you all rocks are as big as hens' eggs," David said. "I wonder I never see such small eggs. It would take a hundred of them to make a dozen."

"I've never given you a wrong turn, David, and I never saw the like of this one."

"And probably glass."

"Wouldn't I know the difference?"

"Yes, you would know the difference." And already David Daumier was going along with Henry the spotter.

"There are little islands in that Head Line." Hodl still talked to himself and to several who listened in both amusement and admiration. "In anyone but myself it would mean that a person with such islands in his Head Line was a little peculiar. Good afternoon, sir, is my conversation worth a beer to you? I have said it myself a hundred times that I'm the most interesting person I ever listened to."

"Yes, your talk is worth that," said David Daumier. "Bar-man, fill my friend again. That is a gaudy little ring you have there, skyman. The stone is simulated, of course."

It was the finest diamond that David had ever seen, and he had traded as many diamonds as any man in the universes."

"There's deception in you," Hodl rebuked him. "Let us be open. You are a professional. There's a little blue light that appears behind the eyes of a professional when he sees a stone like this. Did you know that? You sparkle from it. And the stone is not simulated."

"A little too yellow."

"Golden rather. All great diamonds are golden. The small blue ones are for children."

"We will assume it is hot. Fortunately I can handle it, at somewhat of a discount, of course."

"If it were hot and of this size, would you not know about it?"

"It isn't from Earth," said David. "I doubt that it's of any trabant or asteroid. It hasn't the orange cast of those of Ganymede, and I'd know a diamond from Hokey Planet anywhere. Is it from Astrobe? Pudibundia? Bel-lota?"

"No, it isn't from any of the Hundred Worlds, nor from any licensed planet. I didn't pick it up in any such backyards. It's from a distance."

"Has it a name?"

"A private name only."

"Likely it has a flaw."

"If it had a dozen it would still be peerless. But it has none."

"Not even a built-in curse?"

"I have worn it in health. I believe it is lucky."

"Since we admit it has value, why are you not afraid to wear it openly?"

"I'm a full-sized man, and armed, and in my wits. I would not be easily taken."

"It is too large to market," said David, "and diamonds are down."

"To the buyer, the market is always down."

"If you would set a price—to turn the conversation to the point."

"Oh, if you like it, I'll give it to you," Hodl said.

David ordered a drink to settle his nerves before he answered.

"For a moment I didn't recognize your opening," he told Hodl after he had sipped and swallowed. "Skyman, I would bet that you have haggled prices on Trader Planets."

"Aye, I've dealt with the gentlemen there and found

them not too sharp," said Hodl. "I left the Traders, shirtless and barefoot, it's true, but not much worse than I was when I went there. I'm an easy mark."

"I wouldn't like to play poker with you."

"It is not my game. I am too guileless."

"Would five thousand interest you?"

"Not very much," Hodl said looking at the Bump of Rectitude of his right hand. "I wouldn't stoop to pick it off the floor, but if it were in my pocket I wouldn't trouble to throw it away."

"Yes, you have haggled on Trader Planets. I could double it, but that is my limit."

"That will do nicely, David," said Hodl.

"What? You will go along with me? You will sell?"

"I will sell nothing. Am I a merchant? I will give it to you as I said that I would. But to salve your feelings, I will accept the small sum you have named. Out of respect to you, I would hardly accept a smaller sum with an easy mind. Bring it here and lay it on the bar."

"I will send Henry," said David. He nodded to Henry, and Henry left.

"You have sent Henry, but not for the money," Hodl smiled as he studied the Island of Icarus of his right hand. "He has gone to collect some comic strip characters to keep me company. One of them, what we call *homo conventus* or mechanical man, will analyze myself and my gaud. Only after you are satisfied with the reports (and I'm told that they miss nothing nowadays) will you go and get the money. I admire your prudence, for this is the way that gentlemen do business."

And that is the way that the gentlemen did it. Henry Hazelman returned with three comic strip characters, and one of them was a machine—a descendent of Structo the Mechanical Man from the strip of that name.

It was Structo (his name in Hodl's mind only) who affably and left-handedly shook hands with Hodl and engaged him in conversation.

"It is a fine hand, sir," said Structo. "(I am told you were saying the same thing about it yourself), and a

fine ornament on it. No, do not attempt to withdraw your hand, skyman. It is necessary that I retain my grip in order to analyze yourself and your thing. My own filaments make contact with the crystalline complex, as well as with your own retina. I can read you like a book, to coin a phrase."

"Look out for a little double phrase in a middle chapter," said Hodl.

"It's an anti-bunko machine, skyman," said David Daumier. "It reads you and your stone at the same time. Well, what do you read, Penetrax Nine?"

"Mr. Daumier, the stone is sound and without flaw," said Structo (Penta 9), "It rings like a bell."

"—to coin a phrase," said Hodl. "How do I ring?"

"Yes, that is the question," said David. "My device, skyman, has appraised the stone, as my eye has done. But at the same time it can read what is in your mind regarding that stone. Should there be a flaw in the stone to escape both myself and my device, my machine will find it in your mind."

"Intelligent-looking contrivance, is he not?" said Hodl. "Can he follow a syllogism to the end? Can he recognize a counter-man? Can he count the marbles when the game is over?"

"He can't, but I can," said David. "His job is to detect, and he does it well. My contrivance can sniff out every newest trick in the world."

"Aye, but can he snuffle out the oldest?" Hodl asked. "How do you read me, contrivance?"

"Yes, is there any doubt in the mind of this man about the stone, Penta?" David asked.

"Mr. Daumier, I had to travel some distance into his mind to find the stone," said Structo. "But his mind is serene about the stone. It is good, and he knows it is good. Only—oh, no sir! Do not attempt to match grips with me, Mr. Skyman, even in fun. I have a grip of iron! I *am* basically iron. You will be injured if you persist. Or do I have it wrong. Why, you have crushed my hand as if it were an eggshell, to coin a phrase. No matter, I

always carry a spare. Now, if you will release me, Mr. skyman—thank you.”

“Quite a grip, skyman,” said David Daumier. “You crushed an iron probe that was built for durability. But my contrivance had already answered my question for me. You have no mental reservation as to the stone. I will go get the money now. My people will keep you company, skyman, and the contrived one will repair himself meanwhile.”

David Daumier left on his errand.

“I meant to say something else,” chittered Structo (Penta 9) when its master was gone, “but you squeezed the thought out of me. My nexus at the moment was in my hand which you crushed.”

“You intended to say, gentle contrivance, that I knew the stone was good, too good,” said Hodl, “and that I was laughing in my mind. Of course I was! I’m a merry man, and it gladdens me to give away a thing too good to keep.”

The contrivance put on another hand and busied himself hooking it up. The two human c.s. characters, glowering gunmen, studied Hodl with sleepy evil eyes and seemed more mechanical than their mechanical comrade.

After a decent interval, David Daumier returned with a tightly-wrapped brown paper package. It was of fair size and was marked with a deformed Greek M, Daumier’s own code for the amount in the packet.

“Now we will make the exchange,” David said softly, and he laid the paper-wrapped package openly on the bar. “Lay the ring beside it. Then I open and count.”

“The ring won’t come off easily,” said Hodl. He worked and turned it vigorously. It was quite tight. “There is an amusing story of how the ring came off the finger of the last owner,” Hodl told them. “I finally used a bolt-cutter.”

“The band doesn’t show it,” said David. “An expert must have rejoined it.”

"The band wasn't cut, the finger was," said Hodl. "Say, that man did make a noise about it!"

"I'll send for a jewelers' saw," said David. "I don't mind the band being cut."

"Soap and hot water are quicker," said Hodl. "It'll slip off easily with that."

And soap and hot water were already there. The basin was brought by a counter-man in a dirty apron. And who notices a counter-man? Especially who notices that he is a pun? So the only one who recognized the man in the dirty apron as Willy McGilly was Hodl.

Hodl soaked his great hand, and the ring came off. Hodl held it dramatically (while the counter-man made his counter unseen) in one of his great hands with their deep lines that betokened genius, and the faint islands in the Head Line that in any other man would indicate something a little peculiar about that genius.

"It's a nice ring," said Hodl with regret. "Now we count."

Two of the comic strip characters patted their arm-pits to indicate that the bulge there had a reason for being, Henry Hazelman the spotter lounged in the doorway of the tavern to spot anything that should come, and David opened the package and began to count out the hundreds. Those bills sing a soft song to themselves when they fall on each other.

When he had reached the count of thirteen, David's eyelid flickered and he paused, but for much less than a second, only long enough to check and recheck in his rapid mind and to put down a faint surge of panic.

When David had reached thirty, Hodl reached out and lightly touched one of the bills. "It is nice looking money," he said. He removed his hand, and David continued to count.

Only one who knew the diamond-factor well, or who knew all men well, could have known that David was nervous. Only a very quick eye could have detected that his hand trembled when he passed the fifty mark. And only a consummate genius like Hodl could have known

that the throat of David was dry, or have guessed why it was.

Hodl reached out and touched another bill, the sixty-third or the sixty-fourth, it does not matter which.

"It is nice-looking money, David. Possibly too nice-looking," he said. "Continue to count."

The comic strip characters made moves towards their weapons, but David gulped and went on with the count.

Seventy . . . eighty . . . ninety . . . ninety-nine, one hundred. There was ripe finality about it. And David waited.

"It's a nice pile," said Hodl. "I have never seen such pretty money. Who makes your money, David?"

The comic strip characters and Henry Hazelman started their moves again, but Hodl froze them at half-reach. There is a proverb that a gun in the hand is worth three in a shoulder holster, and Hodl had one in his hand so fast that it sparkled in all their eyes.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr. Daumier," Hodl said softly. "I did not know that you dealt in funny money. To offer a poor price to a poor skyman is one thing. To pay even that in counterfeit is another. The deal is off, sir! I will keep my ring, and you may keep your pile."

"It can't be," David groaned bedazed. "I never take a bad bill. I sure never took a hundred of them. I myself have just got it from my own safe."

"It *does* look good. It is almost the best I have ever seen," said Hodl. "But, David, you have handled a million bills. You know what it is."

"You switched the package," said David, hoarsely.

"I have not. Your men and your machine have scanned me the whole time. I have nothing on me but this ring now back on my hand, and this little thing back on my other hand. And my pockets which I turn out for me contain nothing but twelve cents Earth coin, a small luck charm (a coney's foot), and a Ganymede guilder. Your machine can read me as to physical things without contact."

"That's right, Mr. Daumier," said Structo (Penta 9). "That's all he's got on him."

"I came with this, and with this I leave," said Hodl.

They looked at the stocky skyman with the forearms like a lion's and the little gun in one of his deep-lined hands. And they were afraid to jump him.

David still didn't know how the switch had been made. But now he knew when.

That evening in another tavern, and this a secluded one down in Wreckville, Hodl Oskanian and Willy McGilly and some of their friends sat and drank together. And from a bundle of bills similar to David's, Willy McGilly now counted out bills, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred; and these were valid.

"They have multiplied the Earth by billions and made all things intricate," said Willy. "Men are not the same as their fathers were, and a man would need three brains to comprehend all the new devices. And yet in quiet places, like a Green Valley, some of the simple and wholesome things endure—old friends, old customs, old cons—sweet frauds that are ever young. We are like ancient handicrafters in an automated universe, but we do fine and careful work.

"They have multiplied it all, but the basic remains the same: The Setting (and the hands of Hodl *do* set the thing off well): the Bait (and the Stone would have to be the finest ever or we'd have worn it to dust using it for bait); the Warning, to give fun to the game; the Counter-Play; and then the Innocent Disclaimer."

Hodl once more gazed at his hands, and he spoke.

"It was a nice touch, Willy, to use his own brown paper to wrap your own bundle, and to tape it so similarly with his own 'David Daumier Jeweler' tape. It was nice to find out and reproduce his own peculiar mark for the amount, and to learn all the little details while you were in his establishment, even though you could not get into The Safe Itself. I hope you didn't help yourself to trinkets while you were there. It would be wrong to burglarize his premises, but it is *licit* to take a taxer in honest com-

bat. You were the good switch-man, Willy, while I was the strong magnet to hold their eyes.

"But, Willy, the water was too hot, and the soap was too strong. You are inconsiderate in so many ways."

"And you are always perfectly considerate yourself?" Willy McGilly asked, cocking an eye-brow like a soaring hawk.

"Always," said Hodl. And he studied his hands with their deep Heart Lines passing through the Mounds of Rectitude and Magnanimity and Piety and Sympathy and Generosity and Gentleness and all the Virtues.

Dean R. Koontz is another of the younger generation of science fiction writers. Here he proves that the alien among us may not necessarily come from a far and distant star . . .

NIGHTMARE GANG

Dean R. Koontz

Cottery was a knife man. He carried six of them laid flat and invisible against his lean body, and with these half dozen confidence boosters giving him adequate courage, he challenged Louis to a fight, for he envisioned himself as the leader of the gang. It was over inside of two minutes. Louis moved faster than he had any right to. He avoided Cottery's blades just as if he already knew from which directions they would be swung. He delivered several punches to Cottery that looked like a small boy's blows in a playful bout with his father, but he crippled Cottery with them as surely as he would have wielding sledgehammers. The knife man went down and threw up all over his own shoes.

It was an object lesson.

One was all we needed.

Louis had many holds on us. Although he did not look it, the fight with Cottery proved that he was somehow our physical superior. Of course, there was also the fact that only Louis knew who we were; none of the gang members could remember any past, beyond joining the gang. I'm sure that all of us, at one time or another, tried to find out who we were, but beyond the moment when we were enlisted by Louis, our memories ended at a tall, obsidian wall that could not be breached. Indeed, it was mentally and physically painful to try to remember. Ask

Louis? He would only smile and walk away, and that just made us twice as curious.

And only Louis knew our future.

It seemed that there was some purpose to the gang, to the slow growth of our numbers, though no one could fathom what it might be. But leave the group and make our own futures? Butch, our barbarian giant, tried that. He had driven his cycle only a hundred yards on his break for freedom when the cramps hit him and he took the spill at thirty-five miles an hour, skinning himself real bad.

Louis was our jailer; the gang was our prison; and the heavy, black cycles were the bars that contained us.

Then came the run down the Atlantic coast, the pounding of the cycles in the super-heated air, nights on the beaches buffeted by the sound of the waves as we slept, plenty of beer that Louis bought for us (he was the only one with money). On that run, I found out what I was. And what Louis was. And what was going to happen to all of us . . .

Cruising the ocean roads to take in the tourist trap towns like White City, Ankona, Palm Beach, and Boca Raton, we made a wild sight. Flowery-shirted tourists and their matronish wives always pulled off to let us go by, their faces white, the men wiping sudden perspiration from their brows. There were twelve of us in the gang, plus Louis. As in any group, there were those who stood out. Butch was six and a half feet and three hundred pounds, another twenty-five pounds for boots and chains and levis. There was Jimmy-Joe, a stiletto thin little bastard with skin like candle wax and wild, red-rimmed eyes like the eyes of a hunting hawk. He giggled and talked to himself and did not make friends. Yul was the weapons nut. His glittering head (even the eyebrows gone, yeah) distracted your attention from the bulges on his clothing: the pistol under his left arm pit, the coiled chain on his right arm.

The rest of the crew ranged along similar lines, though

each seemed a weaker parody of those three. Except for me. I was a natural standout. Although I could be no more than twenty-five, my hair was pure white—eyebrows, chest, pubic, everything. They called me Old Man Toomey.

Then there was Louis.

Louis (you could not call him Lou; it would be like calling Jesus Jess) did not belong in the gang. You could see that in the fine lines of his facial bones, the aristocratic look and bearing that indicated a good private schooling in manners and carriage as well as mathematics and grammar. He didn't have the constitution for the rugged life either, for he was small—five eight, a hundred and twenty pounds, no muscle on him. Yet he was the undisputed leader, the one who had brought us together and was planning what to do with us next.

It was two o'clock on the third day of our coast run, and we were just outside of Dania, Florida, when things began to change. Ahead, a souvenir shop loomed out of the sand and scrub, announced by huge hand-painted signs decorated with pictures of alligators and parrots. Louis raised his arm and motioned us off the highway. We followed him, thumping onto the berm and crunching across the white gravel between half a dozen parked cars. When the clatter and growl of our engines died, Louis dismounted and stood before his cycle, skinny legs spread wide.

"We're casing it," he said. "Don't cause any trouble. We'll be back tonight."

We had never cased a place before. This was the changing point in our existence. Somehow, I knew it was a change for the worse.

We moved inside the shop, fingering the stuffed alligators, carved coconuts, shell jewelry, and genuine Indian thatchwork. The patrons stayed clear of us, their faces pale, their voices lower, more strained than the voices of people on vacation should be. The gang always garnered this sort of reaction from the straight citizens who came into contact with it. We all got a kick out of the

sensation of power our appearance gave us, even though most of us must have sensed the basic psychological sickness in such an attitude.

Louis pushed past the sales counter at the back of the store and moved toward a thick, beaded curtain that closed off another room. The clerk, a tanned and wizened little man with gray hair and a prune's share of wrinkles, grabbed him by the arm. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked. His fear quaked down in the bottom of his throat like a wet frog.

Louis didn't answer. He turned and stared at the clerk, then down at the hand that held his arm. After a moment, the clerk let go and stood rubbing his cramped fingers. I could see dark bruises on his hand, though Louis had not touched him. His face had gone totally white, and there was a tic beginning in the corner of his left eye. His finger seemed paralyzed; he rubbed them frantically as if to restore circulation.

Free now, Louis continued to the beaded curtain and lifted some of the strands to peer through. I was near enough that I could see what was back there: an office of some sort, small, stacked with boxes of trinkets, containing a single desk and chair. Louis seemed satisfied, dropped the beads, and came back past the clerk who made no attempt to stop him this time.

"Let's go," Louis said, walking for the door.

We went.

Two miles from the souvenir shop, we found a secluded section of beach and settled down for the evening. I was still upset about the sudden change of atmosphere, the "casing" of the store. My gut churned, and I felt cold and hollow, afraid of the future simply because I had no idea what it was going to be. Burch and a Spic cat named Ernesto went into Dania for some beer, and a celebration ensued. It was obvious that all of us shared the realization that something big was going to happen, something irreversible.

Louis stayed away from us, walking the beach, stop-

ping now and then to watch a whitecap peel along and spill its froth onto the wet sand. Several times, he threw his head back like a wolf and laughed, high and shrill, until he made his throat hoarse. Several times, when the moonlight limed his chalky features, he looked like one of those small glass animals you can buy in old fashioned curio shops; the illusion was so real that I thought of stoning him, trying to break him. Then I thought of Cottery and the object lesson.

Half an hour after the sun had set and the first heavy waves of mosquitoes were buzzing out of the shoreline foliage, he came up the beach, kicking sand, and stopped before us. "Let's go back," he said.

I rode up front, just behind Louis. It might have been my unreasonable terror that made me try, in desperation, what I did. I could close in on Louis, I thought, take my cycle into the back of his fast enough to leap over him before we both fell. I might be hurt and hurt badly, but Louis would get his head broken sure as hell. And then we would all be free. Whatever was about to happen would not happen.

I leaned into the bars and was about to accelerate when I felt a hand close over my nose and mouth, cutting off my air. I jerked my head about, could not shake it loose. I could see no hand, only feel it. When I was beginning to grow dizzy and the cycle was wobbling under me, the hand departed, allowing me to breathe.

Louis had won again.

We roared into the parking lot and stopped our cycles behind four cars, dismounted and stood there dumbly, waiting for Louis to tell us what to do. He climbed slowly off his Triumph Tiger and turned to face us. The large orange and green neon sign that blinked and rippled overhead cast eerie shadows on his face, illuminating a wide, toothy grin that split his face like an axe wound. Then he spoke to us. Two words. There is no way to convey the manner in which he spoke the command. He did not use his lips or tongue. Instead, the words came

across the front of my mind like teletype print, burning into the softness of my brain so that I squealed. There was no denying that order. No denying it at all.

Kill them!

Almost as a single organism, we moved forward, the stones making brittle protests beneath our boots, into the fluorescent brightness of the souvenir shop.

There were eleven tourists in the shop, plus the clerk, the same little man who had tried to stop Louis from going to the beaded curtain that afternoon. They looked up as we came in, offered us the same timid reactions we were used to receiving. But that was not going to be enough to pacify us this evening. Not nearly enough.

Kill them!

Louis said it again. He stood by the door, grinning, watching, one foot crossed over the other and his hands shoved in his jean pockets.

We moved forward, taking out the hardware we carried.

Butch moved in ahead of me, surprisingly fast for the ox that he was, and swung a huge fist at a banker type in a loud yellow shirt and dark blue Bermuda shorts. He drove the man's nose back into his skull, splintering it into the fleshy gray of his warm brain. The banker did not even have time to scream.

Yul wrapped that steel chain around his fist, moving in on some of the women. His muscular arms, hanging bare from the sleeveless tee-shirt he wore, rippled and flowed like the stalking legs of a cat.

Jimmy-Joe had his hands full of knives. The one in his right was dripping something red.

Kill them!

I took my pistol out. It felt cold and unmanageable in my hand, and I wanted to drop it. I could not. It was as if my hand moved independently of the rest of my body.

A tall man with eyebrows that grew together over the bridge of his nose pushed past me, making for an open window on my right. I fired point blank into his chest. He looked startled, as if he had thought the bullets were

blanks and the flowing blood was ketchup, then choked. His eyes watered, and tears ran down his cheeks. Then he fell over on the floor, pulling down a display of post cards.

I dropped my pistol and grabbed onto the sales counter for support. My stomach flopped. I gagged, bent over the counter and brought up my supper of cold chicken and beer.

The rest of that time was hazy, like a sun-ruined section of film. There were shots and screams and pleading voices, blurs of color. I heard a child crying, maybe a little girl. The crying stopped abruptly. Then we were moving out, following Louis, boarding the cycles and leaving the lot.

We went down off the shoulder of the highway, back along the sand to where we had eaten. I fell off my machine when it was parked and rolled over in the sand, face down, trying to think. Sometime later, Butch tapped me on the shoulder and offered me a beer. I declined, then rolled on my back to see what was happening among the rest of them. It was not what I had expected. Jimmy-Joe was standing in the center of the group, playing the part of a woman whose throat he had slit, alternately taking his own role in the affair. When he reached the point where he skewered her throat, the gang laughed and other stories began being exchanged.

Someone broke out several bottles of vodka when the beer ran out, and the party got noisier. I stood up and pushed my way through the gang, trying to reach Louis where he sat next to the tide line. I passed Yul who had droplets of blood spattered across his bald head like freckles. Jimmy-Joe was honing his knives on coral. Butch, his eyes very round and wild, was licking an unknown victim's blood from his hands.

When I reached Louis, he turned and shook his head to let me know he would not talk with me. I tried to say something anyway, but there was an invisible hand in my throat that stopped the words from forming, much like the hand that had almost smothered me when I had

thought of killing him. I stood, watching him for some time. He was reading a newspaper, the *Miami Herald*. After a long time, he carefully tore an article from the front page, folded it, and tucked it in his shirt pocket. Standing, he called to the gang and explained that he would be gone until morning and that we were to enjoy ourselves. Then he was on his Tiger, moving across the sand, gone.

Everyone was silent for a moment, for we all knew what this meant. The only times Louis left us was when he was going to recruit a new gang member. When the idea had sunk in, the revelry began again, slowly at first, then picking up speed and becoming boistrous and jubilant.

I went to the edge of the water and picked up the paper. There was no way to tell what the story had been about, for he had removed all of it. Then I remembered the Gulf station a quarter of a mile back the road. It was highly possible the station had a vendor for the *Herald*—or at least that the attendant had a copy of his own. Somehow, the story in the paper tied in with the new recruit. I guess I had some idea that it would shed some light on my own past too. Without thinking of the cycle, I struck out along the beach, crawled up the embankment to the highway, and walked to the service station.

There were two copies of the *Herald* left. When I was about to buy one, I remembered I had no money. Luckily, a car drove up, requiring the attendant's attention, which left me free to steal. I ran all the way back to our camp, fighting the urge to look at it.

On the beach, I spread out the mutilated paper that Louis had been reading, then opened my whole copy and compared them to see what had been torn out. I read the article twice to make certain I was not wrong. Then I threw both papers into the water and went back to my cycle. I did not sleep that night.

In the morning, when Louis came back, I was awake, my eyes stinging, but my mind alert. He brought the new

recruit with him, a fellow by the name of Burton Kade. He was the same Burton Kade that had been the focal point of that newspaper article. He matched the front page picture in every detail. Eleven months ago, Kade had used a shotgun on his mother and father while they had lain asleep in bed. Then he had gone on to systematically beat to death his two young brothers, one eight and one ten. He had been executed yesterday morning.

There was a very ugly thought in my mind, one that I did not want to face up to. To avoid it, I began thinking rapidly of other things, of Louis and what he might be. A demon? That seemed unlikely. Why would a demon have to summon up a dead maniac to commit violence when the demon himself could do far worse with his own powers?

No, not a demon, not a devil. I began to remember things about Louis, things that started fitting together in an unpleasant way. There had been the time he had defeated Cottery with childish blows. The time Butch had gotten cramps and wrecked because he was trying to leave the gang. The bruises on the clerk's arm, though Louis had not visibly touched him. The invisible hand smothering me when I tried to kill him. These were examples of . . . what? Mind-over-matter—one of those extrasensory perceptions you hear so much about? In that last instance, there had been a case of telepathy, for the lousy kid had known what I was thinking, had known I wanted to kill him.

This skinny little monster did not seem like the first of a new race: the first esper, the first man able to warp the realities of life and death to recover a body from the grave. Yet . . . He was. The first of a new race . . . and tainted with madness. Maybe that is the price to be paid in this new evolutionary step; maybe all espers will be monsters like Louis. Or perhaps Nature will correct this mistake and make them benevolent. I don't really care. All I know or care about is that Louis is a beast, and it is Louis who is here now, Louis who shapes my future.

And what was my past? What did I do that was so

horrible as to turn every hair on my body white, even though I am only twenty-five?

I do know what is going to happen to us. There have been two massacres since that first, there will be many more. We will never be caught, for Louis uses his psychic powers to search for clues before we leave a scene, uses them to wipe the minds clean of anyone who accidentally sees us.

I am afraid we are immortal. we will go on killing until even the sun is black and hard and dead. We have been brought back from the grave, an even baker's dozen of ghouls. We are the Nightmare Gang that sweeps, gibbering, out of the night and lays waste to whatever comes before it.

We are the Nightmare Gang. We kill while Louis watches, laughing, clutching his sides with his skinny arms.

And the worst thing, the very worst thing is that I think I am beginning to enjoy myself.

Edward Wellen astonished the science fiction audience of the early and mid-fifties with a double handful of brilliant stories, then disappeared from view. It's a pleasure to welcome him back with his first new story in many years; it's to be hoped that he'll be with us for many more to come.

THESE OUR ACTORS

Edward Wellen

Two tired telecast beams crossed at a point in space. In time, a drifting plasmoid passed through—enveloped—the intersection. The plasmoid would have ignored either alone but the stereotaxic tickle wakened it out of its subdreaming state. The plasmoid scanned the signals dreamily.

In mid-leap Aanum grew aware of himself leaping. Moving while trying to find the logic of his movements, he braced himself for the jolt of landing. Low-energy messages in his fibers . . . fibers? . . . triggered high-powered operations. His weary muscles . . . muscles? . . . were lifting him, pushing him, pulling him. Logic told him that the emotion arising from these bodily changes was fear. All in a flying split second he knew danger lay ahead. His long run had stitched him for a helpless moment to the valley floor, had held him in naked view. He had to—and was moving to—take cover.

He landed in a crouch behind a clump of eess. The eess quivered in its sleep at his nearness, but to him the eess itself was the nightmare; that was what the quivering of his own body told him. Taking care not to touch any eess, he stretched slowly to look . . . look? Let light strike his eye surface? . . . up and around.

Nothing. So much for logic. Then a slight stir on the verge of the slope caught his eye by the tail. Someone

crept forward there, carefully parting the growth fringing the overhanging rim of the valley. The gleam of a fluted muzzle. A sniper. And at a point in line with the beckoning tip of Mount Stij beyond. And so between Aamm and what he suddenly knew to be his goal.

Aamm pulled back out of sight and out of seeing but he could feel the sniper looking down. Feel? No, deduce. Logic told him the sniper was looking down ready to aim the fluted muzzle, ready to fire the water-slugs that would leach out Aamm's marrow. Marrow? No matter, he had gained cover in time.

But his tenseness told him he could not hide long. The blades of eess would come out of their midday sleep, would unsheathe and take leafy wing to impale flying insects—and stab anything in their way.

Too, his whole form-pattern-set said Mount Stij summoned him. And here was a thing to wonder about: how did he know names, that eess was eess, that a mountain was a mountain, that that mountain was Mount Stij, that his own name was Aamm? Had memory diffused onto his very skin? He didn't know. But he knew that before dark he had to reach the hubble-bubble of refuge atop Mount Stij, that its name was Viipoy, and that it was an obsidian city doming a volcanic pipe.

To build strength for that last run he rested in the narrow shade of the eess. He lay back as if to dream he already breathed the smoke of forgetfulness.

He stiffened. His eyes opened wide. Belu's sun—Belu was the name of his world and it spun in space about a star—had shot ten degrees lower. A snuffling behind him had awakened him, one peril saving him from the others. His time had narrowed and the blades of eess were already loosening in their sheaths. Soon the air would be dark with daggers. But the snuffling itself pointed the nearest peril.

A klab had picked up his scent. The klab would drive him from his cover, would block the way he had chosen, would bring him in sight of the sniper. Aamm fought to keep from reeking with love.

In his mind . . . on his skin . . . he heard the hard voice of his trainer. "When you approach love with fear or fear with love you approach your doom."

Without seeing the klab Aamm knew he had nothing to fend off that fiend with: nothing, not a blade of eess, would avail against the blood-rusty spikes. Nothing unless he made himself nothing.

His eyes picked out a likely stalk of eess. He scooped soil away from the plant, digging down only till the soil grew rich with dead bugs. He bared enough for a hold between sting of root and thin sheath of blade, then grasped and pulled. The eess tore loose with a small shriek. The tiny rootlets writhed in the air, vainly seeking, then one by one died with a twitch. The klab snuffled nearer. Aamm made himself wait for all the rootlets to fall still. Then he parted them and dug his forenail into the middle bulb.

Blue juice spurted. He caught the vegetal blood in the cups of his hand and began to slap it silently on his pulse spots. He sniffed quietly and the logic of his reaction told him he fought gagging. No gainsaying the scent masked his own. But the klab's sense of smell was sure to be keener than his.

He held his breath, and not against eess-stink alone. He listened to the snuffling. It came nearer, though the sound seemed more the effect of logic or imagination than of hearing. Still, that seemed only to add to the eerie reality. Aamm noiselessly slipped the blade of eess from its sheath. As though it knew what a feeble weapon it was it trembled in his grip. Its leaves struggled to flap, then grew limp.

The snuffling stopped, puzzled. Quick sharp inward snorts followed. But the klab had lost him at his leap. It began casting about. Once it faced him. Small animals would have yielded to the love in the terrible eyes and flung themselves into the spiky embrace. Aamm looked the klab in its useless eyes and held still. It turned. It had lost him. Regressing in frustration, it backtracked its own smell, its blind howling waving in the wind.

Aamm quickened. Here was his chance. The sniper's gaze would be following the klab away from this clearly tenantless clump. Aamm gathered for a dash to bring him under the overhang of the rim. Once he gained that he'd climb to nearly below the sniper, wait for eess-blades to bewilder the air, then swing up and over, take out the sniper, and be away on the easy lope to the hubble-bubble of refuge.

Just as he bunched, something slashed across the world, sheared sun and overhang and mountain tip away, seamed the remaining landscape to a slice of indoors. The sun had gone from the sky, but not the light. The room too had its own light.

That it was a room of some kind was clear once he allowed for its crazy tilt. He saw strange and strangely-clinging furnishings. It looked only a step to the join but he did not take the step.

His impulse, his compulsion, was to dash for the invisible shelter of the overhang while making himself not see this visible manifestation. And almost he could feel the ghost of himself do that. But as if some interference had jarred his logical momentum and shocked him into free will—or free won't—he held himself in his set crouch and stared. His grip tightened on the hilt of the eess-dagger.

In the far corner of the room stood—or because it appeared to infract gravity, leaned—a being almost of his own kind. It slanted at him in profile. A female, in something sheer molded to her form. But her flow of red hair and her golden breast failed to answer to the tilt. She could not be real, then. She must be all one piece, not fluid flesh. And her stillness argued statue. Then he saw she was moving.

Her motions were slow, hypnotically slow, dreamlike. Her foreshortened feet spun her with a slowness it was hard to believe tendons could stand. The face was not a Belurian face, the smile was not a Belurian smile, and her gaze did not meet his, but in an agony of time she faced him and smiled.

It was a thing to make him think he had already

reached the hubble-bubble of refuge and was dreaming. It was a trick to lure him into sniping range, a transfixed target. It had to be false. Test its reality.

With his free hand he picked up a clod of the soil he had loosened around the plant he had torn out. He molded and firmed it in the double cup of his hand, then tossed the ball of dirt onto the slanting floor. The arc took a weird nodal turn in the air before the ball describing it struck the floor. The ball slid up the cant and stopped. It did not slide back down toward him and out into his landscape but stuck fast. The female had not started at the toss or the impact. Her smile remained fixed. If anything, it widened. A challenge? The rules were still the rules.

Aamm drew breath, then straightened and stepped across the join.

A sense of torque seized him on the threshold, then another gravity took hold, and now as he found his balance and looked back his own landscape had the crazy tilt. The start of movement swung him around.

With awful slowness, with painful grace, the female thrust her hand out as in greeting, palm up. Out of nowhere, a bumpy cylinder appeared. One moment it had never been, next moment it rested on the curiously flat palm. Tall as the hand was long, a bit narrower than the hand was wide, the cylinder had a coat of bright clashing colors. With like dreamy slowness her other hand floated up and a long finger pointed to the cylinder.

Not trusting her, he kept his eyes on her face, but the edge of vision made the cylinder out to be of some plastic material and to have a thin tube, as long as the finger, curving out from the top. Her mouth opened slowly and in a low oozy voice she spoke in some language he did not know. Then with the same behindhand play of expression she smiled again toward him as though waiting for him to answer.

She listened to his silence, then with an intense languidness nodded. In a stunning absence of action he found they were all at once three paces nearer each other. He

blinked. But she was again in the mode of dreamy slowness, so that he did not notice until a spray came out of the tip of the tube that she was squeezing the cylinder.

The spray drifted his way but, as though striking an invisible barrier, formed a plane of gas that transformed into a patch of sheer fabric hanging in the air, a curtain between them. He touched it. It was real. It had the feel of a drumhead, though with much more give. He backed away. A grosser squeeze might spray out a net to entangle and entrap him.

But as he gave himself more room all angles suddenly shifted. Fighting dizziness, he looked around. No trace of the open way he had come in. A wall of blankness where his valley had been. Trapped. He whirled. He was right up against the membranous curtain.

Through it he saw the female, still nearer, slowly twirl the cylinder a quarter turn on her palm and point to what seemed to be an inscription on the side. But he would not let her distract him again. He saw now that a door stood open behind her, showing the edge of what appeared to be a sleeping platform. A way out or a way deeper in, but a way.

A slash of his eess-dagger rent the membrane. Now the female seemed to see him for the first time. Her eyes widened in a slow explosion as he passed through the torn veil and made to strike her aside and gain the doorway. She froze smiling and pointing to the inscription.

Then abruptly she vanished, instantaneously changing to huge palm and huge cylinder which grew and grew as if to fill the world.

In mid-speech Walter Domrow grew aware of himself speaking.

"—ember how it was the first time, darling?"

Domrow fought flop sweat. The words didn't feel right and the tensors of smile on his face had no inner justification. At first this time seemed no different from the many other times he had experienced this sense of awakening out of the mechanical, of coming back to

himself. On stage it was part of the long-run syndrome. In a taping session like this it grew out of doing retake after deadening retake and still having to come across freshly. You had to give the illusion of the first time. How? That was the question.

Self-feedback wasn't the answer. A child listened to itself cry and gave its cry a musical rhythm. That was the beginning of art. But that didn't work here and now. He wasn't a child crying. He had listened to himself and it had felt wrong. But he couldn't change his reading. He hadn't found his Motivation. That was why. He was still only skin deep in his role. That was it.

But the director hadn't called "Cut!" So maybe it would pass. Maybe it was enough to be himself, so natural in voice and gesture that you realize at once he's a wonderful actor. Apparently the director thought that of him. Now it was up to the girl—girl? ha!—not to blow up.

At the cue he had just given she should whirl, flash a smile, and—

The set sheared apart. It opened up on the damascene shimmer of a steely landscape, strange scenery that chewed the girl and half the room away. In their place a bloody sun sailed like a slow discus across an off-blue sky toward a tilted horizon, a sky filling with dark flashing of flying daggers, a sky backgrounding an overhang of slope and a bubble-topped hill.

He fought the panicky feeling that millions of eyes were watching him go up in his part. The director knew what he was doing. The director had thrown Domrow into a process shot, had put him up against a projection of a scene out of some fantastic space opera. This was the director's way of jolting him into finding his Motivation. That must be so, because he felt it work.

His Motivation was to go limp with sadness now she was gone, to long for her return, to swell with love and cherish her anew. He had an overriding sense that his life had found purpose and form.

Turning his face slightly away from where the girl should be and toward where the lens would be, what

they called cheating the camera, he held his look of utter longing and of utter lust. A blur of motion in the growth fringing the overhanging rim caught his eye by the tail. A burst of liquid slugs struck him, drank through his chest wall, left him empty and dissolving.

A voice-over filled the air with soft thunder.

"You too can know the joys of—"

The two tired telecast beams, one the Revirginate commercial that had left the horizons of Terra thousands of light years behind, the other the swift-paced sportscast from long-dead Belu, faded from the brainscreen of the plasmoid. The signals that had briefly met and mingled now unkissed and uncrossed and streaked away on their long loopings of the universe. The plasmoid drifted on.

For the shortest of whiles it had made the signals aware of themselves. Now it let them be. With sadness and longing it continued on its journey toward itself. The universe was a flux of uncertain interactions and these occasional nexuses of beams, these airless nothings with their ghosts of being, helped pass the time of space.

At this time nothing is known of the author of the following story: even his/her sex is a matter of speculation. Whether man or woman, it is certain that Pat De Graw is talented, and to be hoped that there'll be many more such stories to come . . .

INSIDE MOTHER

Pat De Graw

"Do you come back inside Mother often?" the girl asked; her name was Twelve.

Because he had known she was near, her voice did not startle Four. He acknowledged her presence with a squinted glance, saw her against the sun's brilliant halo and then turned back to enter Mother.

"Why do you come back here, Four? We don't need Mother anymore."

"There are voices here," he said, turning back to face Twelve. "I come to listen to the voices in Mother." He sat on the front step of mother and waited for Twelve to leave.

"What do the voices say?" She hunkered down beside Four, obviously not intending to leave.

"They are hard to hear. They whisper, like this. You wouldn't be interested, anyway. Just like the others." A beetle struggled to climb a beetle's mountain of sand beside Four's left big toe.

"The others laugh at you for coming back to Mother." She saw the beetle.

"See how the sun touches the beetle's back?" Four said to her, testing her for comprehension.

"It is a bug."

"Yes." He looked at her eyes and was startled to find such intense concentration there. Her brown hand, a falling leaf, slid down the sand hill, and for an instant-

beetle year, Four thought the girl was going to destroy the bug. Instead she fattened her fingers to form a bridge for its passage.

"The word for the color of the beetle's back is 'yellow,'" Four said, letting the melliferous word tumble from his lips. Twelve looked up, into his eyes: he saw himself, microscopically in the colored part of her eyes.

"How do you know that's what that color is?" She brought the quivering creature up to her face, stared past its antennae.

"Mother says."

"Mother doesn't talk, Four," Twelve said.

"Yes. I found a thing to make Mother talk."

"What kind of thing?"

"I don't know what you call it, but it is like a little finger. It pushes down." Four dug a trench in the air with a pointed finger to illustrate.

"So, what does Mother say?" Light-stung wings lifted from Twelve's open palm; then, melting into the sunlight, the beetle disappeared.

"Mother says the words we always have known, like tree and bug and Mother and land and sky. But Mother also says other words."

"Which words?"

"Like the song Five sings, you know the rhyme?"

She nodded.

"Words like those. Did you ever wonder about all the words we know, but don't ever use? Words there are no *things* for."

"No."

"Well, I have. I've wondered what it means when you say . . ." He scraped the tunnels of his remembering to break away one of the useless sounds. ". . . field drive theory."

"I've never thought of that one before." She smiled, half-expecting a joke.

"You haven't?" He was surprised.

"No. Are there any more?"

"Well, all the ones Five sings about. But the way

Mother says them, they don't rhyme. They come out strung together like ordinary words like so and to and dirt and the—"

"Apogee, apogee, apogee!" Twelve finished the traditional rhyme with delight, clapping her hands together in time.

"But not to rhyme," Four was quick to add. "Do you want to hear it whisper, right now?" He stood, a brown, slim sapling in the sun. His hair, a golden cap of fourteen years of growth, was tied at his neck with a flexible vine.

Twelve smiled and nodded her assent. Four took her by the hand, and entered Mother.

"Ohhh," said Twelve. "It's been so long since I've been in here."

"Are you afraid?"

"No," she said, but she pressed close to him and drew herself up tight in the dimness.

His hand darted to the wall.

"Oh!"

"It turns on that little sun, see?"

"I never knew that."

"Just wave that little thing there. I've discovered lots of things in here I never knew before."

"Why didn't we know about this when we lived inside Mother, Four?"

"We were too little, and didn't know as much then. Have you noticed how you remember?"

She was puzzled.

"I mean, do you remember, say, yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And some things that happened many yesterdays ago?"

"Some."

"Well, that's remembering. A lot of remembering is knowing."

Though the inside of Mother was familiar to Twelve, the smells there were strange and frightening. "I've changed my mind," she said.

"No, don't leave. Please. I want to show you the place

where Mother talks." The wall at the end of the room was high and studded with things and things and things.

Four did this and that to some of the high things on the wall. Twelve knew just by watching him that he had done these things many times before.

"I believe you," she said, wanting to get out.

"Listen . . ." With no more force than it takes to push away a reed, his touch brought her close to him. Together they sat down on the hard, cool floor and listened to the air.

"But—"

"Shhh . . . it will not talk when you do." He made that up, but she was quieted by his mild threat.

From the console came a sound: *Addddddddeeeeeeeeeee, aaaaaeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.*

"That hurts my ears," Twelve said.

"Be quiet!"

"Aaaaadddeeeeeeeeeeeeeee."

"That's not a word," Twelve said, cringing, her hands over her ears.

"I know. It does that when you first turn it on."

"Is it crying?"

"No. Just a sound."

"Aaaaaadddeeeeeeeeeee . . ."

"It might be a signal," he speculated. "Or something inside Mother deep. I haven't figured it out yet."

"—temperature, humidity and ventilation control—" a smooth voice was saying.

"Temperature!" Twelve exclaimed, recognizing the word from Five's song.

"Shhh!"

"—this is the fifth month since the babies—"

"Babies? What does that mean?"

"Shhh!" Four slapped her knee. "Now be quiet!"

"—were put into the cradles. They are so beautiful, all perfect. They move often now, trying to be born. I can almost feel mine kicking when he moves. He is in the fourth cradle—"

"Four!" Twelve was quirmung with questions. "That is your name!"

"Listen, there's more."

"My son, Mike. I'm looking at him now. Mike, you would be proud to see him—" There seemed to be a muffled sob from the wall, then the voice continued.

"I keep forgetting—"

Twelve started to question: Four said, coaching, "Forgetting is 'not remembering.'" As he whispered, the voice continued.

"Today, I felt better. Though my face is unrecognizable. If there were only someone left to be with. I'm sure the babies are unaffected. I'm not afraid to die: but I'm just so lonely. The babies are perfect, but I'm alone. They are sealed from me. All I can do is watch the controls, make the necessary adjustments against the day they'll be on their own. There are seventeen cradles, all pink with healthy life. Eight are girls, nine are boys..."

"Eight! Four, it said Eight's name!"

"Oh, God." The voice was louder, strained, and the little room vibrated beneath Four and Twelve's legs and buttox with the sound.

"We forgot to name them. They haven't names, and the numbers will be their names. Mike, our son won't be a number. He will be Michael, too. Oh, Mike, why must I hang on like this? Why don't I just die like the rest of you?"

"Four, I'm afraid." Twelve was already on her feet.

"Don't be afraid. Nothing will hurt you. This is Mother, remember, and nothing inside Mother can hurt you."

"But I'm scared. It is crying, like it is hurt. It doesn't sound like Mother at all." Twelve looked as though she might cry, but Four caught her gently by her wrists.

"Four, I'm here. Nothing will hurt you, I'm promising you."

"I'm so lonely!" the things wailed.

Twelve squeezed a short, wet sound from her throat, and wiggled free.

"Come back here!" Four called after her, but she was outside Mother, running into the low trees.

"My son, my little son. You at least will have a name. Four is no name to have. I can see your strong little hand clinch at the confines of the cradle. You want to be free, don't you? Little Mike, like your father . . . little Mike, little Mike—"

Four turned away from the door to the bright outside. He listened to the voice. It always did this, repeating over and over at this point, always the same words.

"—Like Mike, like Mike, Like Mike—"

"Stop it!" Four screamed at the voice, holding handfuls of fingers tightly, until his nails dug into his skin.

"—Like Mike, like Mike, like Mike—"

Each time, when Four hit the little finger, he could always make it stop.

Intelligence quotient, irrelevant,
If I only knew what it meant.
Fahrenheit, DNA, surface tension.
Father, pregnant, colonial extension.
Incombustable, hydro-dynamic thrust,
Laser, light year, rose, rust.
Overpopulation, re-entry velocity,
Hippopotamus, curiosity.
Sex, calculus, balloon.
Liquid oxygen, chair, vacuum.
Baby, atomic pile, proximity.
God, reflection, virus, apogee.
APOGEE, APOGEE, APOGEE!"

When Four found the group, Five was singing her endless song. He walked toward them, over the white, glistening sandbar which curved around the river.

He saw Twelve, sitting among the singers. She would not look at him. There was still a fleck of leaves in her hair, which had caught in her passage through the underbrush.

Everyone sang the last words, Apogee, apogee, apogee; together, rolling backwards in the sand, laughing.

"How do you keep all those words in your thinking?" Four asked Five as he came closer. Everyone stopped their laughter and became curiously quiet when he entered their circle. Four's shadow cast a long stripe across the lean sun-browned bodies.

Five only looked at him.

"I asked you, how do you remember the words?"

Before she could answer, Seven, a sturdy, wide-faced boy said, "We know where you go, alone. You go back to Mother." He sneered, shading his eyes from a strong afternoon sun.

Four didn't acknowledge Seven's smug, round face.

"Why do you go back into Mother, Four?" The boy asked.

"Because Mother tells me things," Four answered.

"Why aren't you like the rest of us?" Five chirped in. Her dark hair clutched at her little mounded breasts, the color of the sand. She had none of the sarcasm which Seven's voice communicated.

"I have questions," Four answered her.

"Go back into Mother, you scairdy!" Seven laughed. He stood, looked down at Four, and laughed.

"You have secrets too," retorted Four, hoping the quiver in his throat was not audible.

"How do you know, if you're so smart?"

"I've seen you and Five go into the bushes."

Five looked up, anxiously threading her long fingers through her hair. She slid a palm over her navel, along the high mound of her abdomen.

"You put something in Five," Four said, growing more brave. "You put something in Five to make her swell up like that!"

"You're a river bug!" Seven pulled Four's hair, twisting it around to the front of his neck until the clasping vine broke.

The sand was hard beneath Four's back, and he kicked

and bit at his assailant. The noise of his own blood drowned out the cries of the others as they cheered; they always delighted in seeing Four beaten. With desperation, Four found some inner muscle inside himself. He saw a way to hit Seven so that the larger boy screamed.

Falling backwards between the legs of the onlookers, Seven wailed and licked the tears off his dirty cheeks.

Four stood, now a victor for the first time. He looked at all of them.

"Four?" Twelve said softly, reaching for his hand.

"And another thing," Four said. "Don't ever call me that again. Four is no name at all. My name is Mike!" He hit his chest and stood straighter.

They looked wide-eyed, open-mouthed at him.

They were still looking when he walked away. He knew their eyes were still on him, because he had shocked them by saying something they had never heard before.

"Do you really think Mother is talking about you, Four? Twelve asked, following him. They were in the thicket now, where night birds nested, and where geezzls burrowed.

"I told you not to ever call me that again. My name is Mike and if you don't call me Mike I won't let you come with me, understand?" He did not look at her, but he heard her mumble the new name. They walked together the rest of the way to Mother, without speaking.

Inside the cool, dim room, where Mother had spoken to them, Twelve asked, "Where do the words come from, Four—eh, Mike?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking about looking inside, taking it apart, to see where the words come from. It always stops in the same place. Maybe it is broken."

She was silent, beside him now. He could feel the warmth of her skin close to him.

"I'm sorry the others laugh at you."

"I don't think they will laugh as much now. I've learned things, and they will be afraid of me." He sighed.

"They could learn too, if they would come back in and see."

"Is Mother a . . . a person, Mike?" She had to force the strange name from her lips.

"No. I don't think so. But somehow a person's voice has been captured inside Mother. It is hard like stone, but it is smooth, Mother is. I think it is made."

"Ten makes little floats on the river out of sticks."

"Yes, like the floats. Maybe this is some kind of big float. I don't think it grew."

"Do you ever go back to where the cradles are, Mike?"

"I did, once. But it smells bad in there. There is something strange there. "He held up his hands so that ten fingers were straight. "If one finger stood for each one of us there would be this many. But, there are more cradles than there are this many fingers. To say how many cradles there are you would have to hold up all your fingers, *and* this many toes." She watched him bend three toes under. "This many cradles are back there."

"Why?"

"There must have been more of us at one time," Mike said.

"I guess so."

"Where are the missing ones?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they ran away?"

"Maybe," he said, thinking about some of the cradles, clear and empty, and others dark and full.

They thought their silent, independent thoughts for a time.

"There are two kinds of us, you know," said Mike, finally. "There are some like you—there's One, Three, Five, Nine and you, Twelve. Then there's me, and Six, Seven, Ten and Thirteen. But we are different."

"Yes."

She looked away from him, toward Mother's portal, at the bright daylight outside. "Why do you wonder like this, Four? I mean Mike." She looked at him. "There is so

much to do outside. There are so many geezzls to chase. Let's go hunting. I'm hungry!" She tugged at his arm, playfully.

"I was going to try and get inside it, Twelve. To see if there are any more words."

Dropping back beside him, Twelve sighed heavily.

His attention was caught by her movement. "Why do you have that on? You just started wearing that thing, didn't you, Twelve?"

She smoothed out the long leaves that covered her lap and looked away. "You said you didn't think Mother grew here. We grow, though. I'm growing. That's why I wear the leaves. Do you like them?"

"I guess so. We *are* different," he said simply, realizing that she had come to the same conclusion that he had, only in a different way." Gently, a whisper of a touch, his finger rested on the tight skin on her breast, then pulled away.

"How do you know that Seven put something into Five?" She asked.

"Well, something is making her stomach get bigger."

"Maybe it is something she ate."

"I don't think so. I saw them together . . ."

"Oh."

"Sometimes words come to me in the night."

"Words?"

"Pictures. I think Seven sees the pictures, too."

"How will you get inside the thing that makes the voices?"

"I'll break it, if I have to."

"You'll ruin it."

"Let's try, right now."

Later, after breaking the things and things and things with a rock, then prising at the panel with a stick, Mike stood before the gutted machinery. The entrails of the beast lay on the floor at his feet. In his hand a very thin, flat vine dangled.

"You broke it, Mike."

"It was already broken. That's why it would not say any more." The end of the vine slid into a small hole and he touched the little finger again. The crying sound didn't come this time, but instantly the voice began, making Twelve sit straight.

"—we forgot to program so many things into the computer. We forgot to teach them about sex, and love. We forgot to teach them how to build a fire and what clothes are—"

"It sounds hurt," said Twelve.

"Yes."

"—there is no time left—no time! I'm so weak. How will they know? I just can't alter the programs now, I'm too weak—"

The voice stopped suddenly. A whirring sound continued, but there was no more sound.

"Remember," said Mike, "how we could not get out of Mother until we got old enough, and big enough to figure out the secret?"

"That was a long time ago."

"We had to be tall enough to work the opening, and smart enough to figure it out. We would crawl back into the cradles and sleep even after we could get outside Mother. Remember the whistle that called us from outside? Then the door would close. I remember most of it. Seven was the one who finally got Mother open. We played outside, but we still couldn't get too far away. Something was keeping us in. Then we got bigger and smarter, and finally found out how to make Mother open up completely."

"I remember sleeping where it was warm, and gentle songs," said Twelve dreamily.

"Yes, and the funny eating place. I wonder if it is still there?"

"Let's go see," Twelve suggested in a burst of curiosity.

"I thought you were afraid."

"Not now," she said.

Behind the whispering voices-room was the room, wide

and long, where the cradles were. It was dark, and evil-smelling.

"I remember when this room would light up, like the other room," said Mike.

"Did you try to make it light?"

"Yes, but it doesn't work."

"There!" She pointed.

He put his mouth to the spout.

"It works," she said.

"Ehh, it's awful!" He spit out the whitish liquid, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"What about the other food place?"

Beside the spout was a small niche in the wall.

"There's one in the place now." Mike took the bright red pellet from the niche.

"I can remember eating those," she said, but she didn't make a move to eat it now.

"It is hard. I don't think I'll eat it," he said.

"It came from up inside..."

Mike dipped his fingers once more into the pellet dish. "Another one! I never noticed them falling down into the flat part before, did you?"

"I don't think we have enough remembering," she said.

Behind them, in the whispering-voices room, the voice came on again. They left the cradle room so they could hear what the voice was saying.

"I can't hear, Mike."

"Shh."

"—I'm going to die—"

"Die must be a place," said Mike, authoratively. "Like going to the hill, or across the river to the other sand-bank."

"—the controls work perfectly. I'm sure the design of the cradles will protect them. The entire capsule should continue to work for years . . . if it doesn't . . . but I've tested the teaching mechanism, the environmental controls, the relays and the timing devices. Nothing should go wrong—"

"It is getting scary again," Twelve said.

"—I can see the capsule now, pulling away. I have switched off the air supply in this section. There's no use for me to live. The pain is much worse, and I'm a coward. I don't want to die like Mike and the others. I don't know how long we can maintain orbit . . . it is as perfect as I can make it. This is coincidentally recording in the capsule control, as a record in case our orbit decays. We'll be a falling star, every day—" The voice trailed off, leaving the familiar whirring sound.

"Is it broken again?" Twelve asked.

"No. I think it is all through. I don't think there are any more words in it." He touched the turning off finger.

"What does it all mean?"

"I think it is about us. Where we came from. I'll think about it some more, and I'll understand better." He took her by the hand and they left Mother.

Behind them, a whirring thing broke away from the base of the floor, sucking the dirt and dust into itself which they had brought in on their feet.

The group was still on the sandbar. They were clustered together when Mike and Twelve approached.

"Apogee, apogee, apogee!" It was Five's voice, from the center of the cluster. She was screaming.

The group allowed Mike and Twelve to enter its ranks. Five lay on the sand, with her wild words coming from her mouth in gasps. She was in pain, and she seemed to be saying the words for comfort.

"Seven," she screamed again, then gasped. "It's trying to get out!"

"What, Five? What's trying to get out?" He was trying to hold her tossing head on his lap.

"Whatever it was you put in! Apogee! Say the words, everyone, to make the pain go away!" She closed her eyes and stopped writhing for a moment, her breathing a hiss in the evening air.

"What's wrong with Five?" Mike asked.

"She's hurting," said one of the girls.

"I didn't do anything," sobbed Seven. He turned his

terror stricken face toward Mike. Rivulets of tears streamed down his grimy cheeks. Fear brightened the whites of his eyes.

"I told you so," Mike said.

Softly, at first, one of the group began chanting the song. The others joined in the chorus.

"Intelligence-quotient, irrelevant,
If I only knew what it meant.
Fahrenheit, DNA, surface tension . . ."

Five screamed again, but they only chanted louder, until her screams were part of the chant.

"Father, pregnant, colonial extension!"

They said it all, until the end, and Mike felt himself drawn in, singing with the rest of the group.

When it was over, Five was still. She didn't writhe. Her face was a white petal against the dark, twisted strands of her hair. The night was gone, and the morning touched the sky over the river valley. They were all asleep now, except for Seven who still held the silent face of Five in his lap. He moved her aside so he, too, could rest, and folded himself into an infant at her side.

Mike awoke first, and sat looking at Five. She was not breathing. Twelve opened her eyes and sat up. Mike stood, stretched, and began walking away. Twelve followed.

"Is she asleep?"

"No!" Four said through his teeth. "She won't ever sing again, or move, or do something." His mind was full of words and pictures, of the thoughts of empty cradles and cradles which were still full. "She's like a geezzl when it has been run down and stepped on."

"Wait, Mike . . ."

Mike ran into the bushes, suddenly afraid and not knowing why.

"Tell me what it means, Mike."

"I don't know. I'll never know, now that I've broken into Mother." He turned on her in anger. "Why do you follow me everyplace I go? Ever since we were little, you hang around after me."

She stood still, her eyes pouring out the laughter and tears and all their times together.

"Why don't you leave me alone?" He choked.

Her mouth trembled slightly.

"How would you like for me to do that for you?" He screamed at her. "I could, you know! If you don't stop bothering me, I'm going to put something into you just like Seven did to Five." The branches of a nearby tree caught at his face when he turned from her gaze.

He sat on the hard ground and cried, and when he stopped shaking, her hand was on his shoulder. "Five won't ever sing anymore," he said.

"No."

"There aren't any more songs, then."

"Mike, I can remember the songs, some of them. I even made up one of my own, after hearing Mother talk . . ."

When he turned to Twelve she was laying back against long, brown grass. She smiled.

Mike lay beside her, on his back. "There's a falling star," he said, pointing.

"The star of morning," she said, quietly.

Who would you choose as the five most famous science fiction writers of today? It's certain that anyone's list will include Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov . . . and Poul Anderson. And we're pleased to present all three in this volume. The following short novel tells of the time when men have returned to the Moon . . . for the third time . . .

THE COMMUNICATORS

Poul Anderson

After the thrust and hiss of orbital assumption, there was a great silence. The ship freefell around the Moon. She would complete a circuit while her crew verified that all was in order and got a lock-on to Ground Control, before starting descent.

Marbled blue and white, scars hidden by remoteness, altogether beautiful, Earth's lighted half circle dropped beneath the Lunar horizon. That land became a jagged darkness; and because the Communicators had turned off their cabin illumination, fainter stars appeared to them until their viewport was one wintry blaze.

Brother Roban thought he had grown used to the sight during transit. But suddenly it was as if the knowledge entered him, not as before into his brain or his excited heart, but into his entirety—that the Order was indeed bound home again; today, in his own young person; back to that web of whispers across space and the centuries which was its reason for being and perhaps the reason for life. Weightless in the chair harness, his burly body turned insubstantial as a dream and his awareness whirled forth among the constellations.

A hand fell upon his. A voice murmured, "Steady, son."

The tenderness in gesture and tone was astonishment enough to recall him. For a moment he gulped. One does not easily leave the fringes of eternity. Flesh enclosed

him in pulse, breath, moist skin, the scratchiness of coarse fabric, a gust of faintly acrid-smelling air from a ventilator. Walls of metal enclosed him in narrowness and bleakness. Knowledge enclosed him in mortality, his own and mankind's.

Once a trip from Earth to Moon was nothing. Well-nigh flying themselves, the argosies plied in days from Mercury to Pluto. Treasure was aboard them, and humanity and human hopes. But the last such voyage ended more than three centuries ago. The means no longer exist to build that kind of vessel. We are lucky we can again lift off even this clumsily, from the wreckage of our latest dark age.

"You aren't ready for an ecstatic experience," Primary Luizo said, still with a gentleness Roban had never met from him before. "Later, yes. I am glad to see you are among those who can have them. But best with preliminary training, and the first few times under guidance. Otherwise it can overwhelm you. I don't think you would really be happiest as an ascetic."

"M-m-maybe not . . . sir," Roban mumbled.

The lean features of his superior stiffened into their usual mask. The accented Inglis harshened anew. Luizo came of the Ali de Marokh family, barons who held their Near Eastern marchlands against raiders from desert and sea when civilization had crashed to its nadir, and afterward were in the vanguard of its return. Though he himself had early joined the Order, the soldierly style had remained with him through the years of his life. Under his directorship, Australia Station operated as much like an army base as a conservatory of learning.

"Besides," he said, "we have practical problems. Two of us, to get the whole enterprise started over."

In Roban, anger shouldered wistfulness aside and filled the space where awe had been. "Among a pack of Dominists!" he exclaimed. "How much damage have those barbarians done?"

"Control your emotions," the Primary said. "Nobody

would be sent here who was not a technological competent: not when ships and facilities are as crude as now. He wouldn't survive. It is a bare ten years since spaceflight resumed."

"That makes ten years they've sat on our property."

"I told you to curb yourself, Brother."

Roban looked into Luizo's eyes, glacial green in the dark, aquiline face. "Yes, Primary. I'm sorry."

He bowed his head, as befitted a mere techno reprimanded by an administrator who had, moreover, spent a working lifetime among the records of messages from the stars. His floating hands sought each other and twined fingers till the knuckles stood white. It was bitter for Brother Roban of the Order, who had been plain Roban Stacket of Seattle in Norrestland, to be meek toward those who had conquered his country.

He often wondered why Luizo chose him to come when the Domination of Baikal announced it would ferry a pair of Communicators to Farside. He could readily understand that the Board of Directors would vote the honor of heading and organizing that mission to Luizo himself. The Primary had done more than turn half-ruined Australia Station into a secure and prosperous center for scholars and their families. He had also, alone in mystery, found new interpretations that answered old riddles about what the Others meant in certain of their transmissions. If anyone could bring humankind back into the transgalactic web—could even, maybe, regain the Order's ancient control of the transceivers—Luizo was the man.

But why, out of every possible assistant, did he choose me? I'm just a fisherman's son. I only joined a few years back, after I couldn't stand any longer seeing foreign troops on my soil that had been free.

Could that be his reason? Roban thought abruptly. *The Order of Communicators is supposed to stand outside all politics, all nationality; it speaks to the stars on behalf of our whole species. And by and large, our membership's*

really held that attitude. Otherwise I don't suppose we'd have lasted through the ups and downs and ins and outs of two thousand years. Myself, though—well, I've seen the vision too, when studying the archives or standing out in the night and looking upward—but I haven't forgotten bombs and fire when I was small, Mother crying when Dad never came back, slant-eyed men barracking to this day in (whisper it) Liberation House.

With a tingle: If a chance comes . . . to do something . . . I'm strong and ready.

Swift in her low orbit, the ship raised the terminator. Day burned, first a thin line ahead, then a pockmarked stone waste beneath; and the constellations paled before human eyes while they reeled across heaven. Roban strained forward in his harness. "Can you spot the Station, sir?" he asked out of a tightening throat.

"No." The Primary stroked the pointed beard allowed his rank. "But I did not expect to. We are doubtless being guided from the new navigational posts . . . ah." He broke off. Expressionless, he crossed his arms in proper greeting. "Salutation, Colonel," he said to the man who had appeared in the companionway.

"Salutation to you bot'." Iwan Duna's accent was thicker than Luizo's; but the fact that he spoke Inglis, which had remained the common language of the Order since American times, helped qualify him as the expedition's liaison with its passengers. "May I join you?"

Roban clamped teeth together. The living tongue of Norrestland was not much different from this archaic version; and he had heard it spoken in just that way, by armed men in just that baggy uniform, along the shores of Puget Sound. *How can we stop you?* he wanted to say.

"Assuredly, Colonel," Luizo replied.

"You see," Duna explained, "you have de best view here, except in de pilot section w'ere dey are busy." His native speech governed his throat, imposing its own rhythms, softening and shortening vowels while forbidding such consonantal sounds as *th* and *wh*. But his flu-

ency was such that even Roban had almost stopped noticing the pronunciation.

He pushed foot against foot against bulkhead, soared, checked himself with a hand on the headrest of Roban's chair. *I must not tell you to get away from me*, the techno thought. Sweat welled in his fists. Some broke loose, glittering, dancing droplets.

"We wanted your trip should be enjoyable as possible," Duna went on. "I am sorry you must be strapped in. Dat iss for your safety in case a sudden maneuver is needed."

"You have made this voyage several times before, have you not?" Luizoz asked.

"Yass. I never tire of watching. Es-specially w'en we pass Mare Tranquillitatis."

"Why that?"

"You do not know? Were de very first men landed." Duna moved around to the side, so that both Communicators could see him. His gaze fell on Roban. "Your people," he said. "W'at iss your country wass part of deirs."

And now part of yours, seared in Roban. *Oh, a puppet native government; a shadow Assembly; a pretense at a mutual defense pact; but we are under your empire, paying your tribute, quartering your troops, lately fighting in your frontier skirmishes . . . oh, God, your huntsmen in our clean mountains and forests, your Protector's yacht on our clean waters, and the girl I'd hoped for giggling on the arm of one of you!*

Still Duna regarded the big blond man. He himself fitted Norrestland's popular concept of a Baikalan (though that meant little, when his nation was such a kaleidoscope of races and cultures)—short and stocky, broad in features, high in cheekbones, slightly oblique gray eyes, head shaven except for a reddish scalp lock, face marked with clan tattoos. His coverall was similar to the Communicator's, but green where theirs were blue, sloppy where theirs were neat. At his waist he bore pistol and knife,

surely no use here except to remind him that he was supposed to be a warrior-herdsman.

It had been no great surprise to find him affable. Baikans were, as a rule, if you didn't cross them. His attempts to converse of scholarly matters had been less expected; but receiving no encouragement, he soon gave them up.

"Do you really not remember?" he persisted in the same mild tone.

Roban grimaced. "No chance for much education," he said. "We start work in childhood where I come from, and work hard." *In rain, fog, storm, hauling on lines and capstan bars till our hands grow too thick to hold a pen; but also on chuckling waves where sunlight dances and seats frolic, and woods stand green ashore, and Rainier's Peak floats holy in heaven. Our country, no one else's.* "We must . . . to pay the taxes that pay the tribute."

Luizo scowled, and Roban wished it hadn't blurted out of him like that. However, Duna was unruffled. "I know," he said. "I visited your home grounds once. It isn't de tribute, friend, it is de fact you cannot afford—you have not de resources—to build or buy enough machines. So you plow wit' animals and fish wit' sailing craft. W'at you call tribute is cheaper payment for your defense dan you could manage alone, es-specially if you count cost of dose raids de Eastmen used to make on you. Derefore you will shed de burden of toil quicker."

Luizo intervened, obviously anxious to find a different subject: "Most of the Order's recruits are commoners like Brother Roban. They have everything to learn—not simply our organization, rituals, traditions; no, astronomy, mathematics, the whole range of sciences; if they have the talent for it, interstellar linguistics and semantics. Brother Roban is as far along as he is, at his present age, because he started with the advantage of knowing Inglis. But he has not had time to study economics, politics, or the history of Earth."

Duna glanced ahead, where the blue half disc was rising. "He should. We happen to live dere. Have you explored de past, Primary?"

"To a degree. No more. Besides administration, my work in decipherment has kept me occupied. I need not remind you, in spite of a three-hundred-year hiatus, we are far from a complete understanding of the messages we already have."

"And yet you want more."

"Of course." Luizo gestured at what stars were visible, cold sparks beyond Earth. "What have they been saying to each other, and trying to tell us, while we were away?"

The ship passed over a crater. It resembled neither the volcanic nor the meteoritic sort, but shimmered like black glass under the harsh spatial sunlight; and from its shallow ringwall jutted metal snags. Roban could not forebear to ask, "What's that?"

"Site of a base," Duna said. "Struck by a fusion weapon."

Chill touched Roban. He had seen terrestrial ruins, beginning with those which surrounded Seattle's city wall. But they were not so stark. Men had quarried them, weather had worn them, the kindly soil had crumbled and buried them with green life. "No wonder spaceflight came to an end," he said low.

Duna raised his brows. "Oh, dis is not from de last great war. Dis is from de t'ird. More dan a t'ousand years ago. Dat one brought its own collapse."

The wreckage slid out of sight. Raw mountaintops grabbed after the ship. Then they were likewise gone and a great dark plain lay beneath, curving away over the near horizon. The grimness left Duna's countenance. He stared downward and outward and whispered something to himself—curiously, in Inglis—that Roban overheard, something about an eagle having landed. The young man wondered what it meant.

Farside Station was near the middle of a natural crater; but Ley being big and the Moon being small, the ramparts could not be seen from it. The land reached ashen, boulder-strewn, pitted, footprinted. Shadows of early morning stretched west from every irregularity, making

it stand out more sharply than any canyon crag on Earth. Silence and emptiness magnified other things as well for Roban, sounds of breath and blood, odors of sweat and air purifier. When he overstayed himself in a fixed position, he felt heat gnaw at his sunward side, warmth drain out of the opposite. Mostly, though, he moved, getting the hang of one-sixth gee in a spacesuit, long marvelous bounds through lightness.

Reflection from the ground made his pupils contract. No more stars appeared over the western edge of the world than he had seen where wavelets chuckled and rigging creaked. But a sickle Moon had stood in that sky; and Earth would never stand in this. *I am here*, he thought with wonder. *I am actually here.*

A jog at his elbow, a voice in his earplugs: "You start work, huh?"

His joy broke. He turned to confront the squat shape, masked by a self-darkening faceplate, a Baikalan who had acquired some Inglis while stationed in Alaska. "I'm about to," he snapped.

"You learn Moonwalking fast," Sergeant Aigunov said.

Roban ignored the attempt at friendliness. He admitted the need for guidance before he could safely travel on the surface; and in fact, the rule that no one went topside alone was sensible. Nevertheless—

"I'll check the radio telescope first," he said.

"W'y? No good. Not fix yet."

"Exactly," Roban said. "But it, and the optical instruments for that matter—the X-ray receivers, the particle counters, the gravity wave meters, everything here—is the property and responsibility of the Order. You don't think we simply kept star talk alive for two thousand years, do you? We were always astronomers too. Each time civilization cut its own throat, or just wallowed back in swinish 'practicality,' we had to carry science on alone."

His gaze went to the huge spidery skeleton which overhung the area. Most of the Station was underground. Most of the exterior installations were in buildings suf-

ficiently sturdy to survive three centuries of abandonment. The scattered blockhouse shapes, like the grounded spaceship, were dwarfed in this landscape but hardly touched by its meteoritic sleet. However, the radio dish and its field of antennae had suffered cruelly.

Repairs would cost wealth as well as time and skilled labor. Roban wasn't sure the Order could do the job unassisted. It had considerable holdings and revenues, but were they that great? Probably not. Earth was still crawling back from impoverishment. Had the Communicators been able to construct spaceships, they would not have waited a decade for the Domination of Baikal to offer two of them a ride.

Not that the Domination had regained all that was lost when mankind last went crazy. Technical knowledge didn't go up with cities in radioactive smoke. It was too widely diffused in too many books and microreels. The Order preserved most information; but between them, secular libraries doubtless retained as much of what had been generally known. No, the problem was scarcity of resources, including trained personnel. Theoretically, the first post-collapse spaceship could have been a System-spanning photon-drive giant, totally automated, able to take herself anywhere. In practice, she had to be simple enough for today's industry to produce.

"If you'd taken us here from the beginning," Roban said bitterly, "that observatory would be in action right now." *But no. You had to see if you couldn't read the messages that had come in, with the help of renegades from our ranks, and keep what you discovered to yourselves.*

He started toward the 'scope. Baikal's reports on it were available, but he ought to investigate personally. Motion eased his mood a trifle, until a grin twitched one corner of his mouth. In the end, as always before, the Order was prevailing over mere armed strength.

Its Board of Directors had protested when the Dominator denied repeated requests to send its people Moon-

side. Roban, then a boy, had asked with tearful indignation why it didn't call down the ban on Baikal. His arithmetic teacher, a female member of Seattle Station, which co-operated closely with what public schools there were, had explained quite frankly.

"Roban, dear, the Communicators haven't survived the rise and fall of civilizations by being impulsive. We serve the whole human race: eventually, we hope, the whole of intelligent life everywhere in this universe. We do more than gather and safeguard knowledge. We try to keep it working. That's why anyone who joins us has to renounce his nationality: so he can travel freely, judge and advise impartially. Oh, yes, we charge what seems right for our services, because we must keep our treasury alive. But the important thing is the services themselves, halting a plague, establishing a factory, educating a generation."

(An ideal, as the boy already vaguely knew. The truth was as complicated and disorderly as human affairs always are—episodes of corruption, crankery, schism, abasement, abuse of trust, over-weening arrogance; but also reforms, scholarship, reunity, martyrdom, honesty, humble helpfulness. The Order endured, in its quest for understanding, because ultimately that quest was religious. Whatever name a Communicator might give to God, including Void, his search across the cosmos was a search into the spirit.)

Sister Marja's eyes crinkled. "As for the practical politics, Roban, well, we can only invoke the ban—withdraw ourselves from a country—in the gravest cases. If we did it often, governments might decide they could manage without us! Worse, the mass of the people might lose their reverence for us. No, I think here we need merely bide our time."

She was right. Key information lay hidden—somewhere—in the secret files of the Order. Renegades or no, the Dominator's agents could not interpret those sendings from the stars. There had been immense laughter in Aus-

tralia Station's auditorium when Luizoz read aloud the announcement by Yuri Khan himself: "Thanks to the skill and devotion of our space project personnel, technical difficulties have been overcome to the point where it is possible to carry a limited number of foreign guests—"

Bouncing along beside Roban, Aigunov said: "We not fix because got odder things first." His hand chopped across the Milky Way. "We got to reach Mars. Radio say colony did not die. Got to reach asteroids, mine again, use those minerals to build up Earth again. Stars, they wait."

Well, Roban thought, *the Baikals are scarcely a sentimental folk.*

You couldn't even say that their adherence to dark-age tradition—bonds of kinship, old rites, hunting and herding, the warrior ethic—had such a basis. Rather, it was necessary. Their diversity of peoples, most still more than half barbarian, could never have formed a viable state on the melting pot theory. Nothing would have melted except the pot. Instead, ethnic identity, pride, vying for glory, must be turned into the engine of empire.

And—Roban admitted reluctantly—the imperialism was itself pragmatic. From the beginning, the Dominators had made their objective clear. Several major nations were emerging. Rivalries were sharpening. Baikal would not attempt world conquest; that had always led to disaster. But it would try for military and economic hegemony.

The attempt was succeeding. Through fair means or foul—persuasion, diplomacy, purchase, conquest, alliance—in fact if not everywhere in name, the horse-tailed banner of the Lightning Bolt was flying halfway around the North Pole. And it stood on the Moon. And it was bound for Mars, the Belt, the verges of the Solar System.

But not for the stars, Roban told himself. *Those are ours.*

Stopping at the clifflike base of the radioscope, standing in its immense shadow, he became able to see better aloft. Sun after sun trod forth, unwinking, winter-keen, blue Sirius, red Betelgeuse, the galaxy's frosty rush across

blackness, the Orion nebula where new suns were coming to birth as he watched, Andromeda's vortex whose light was two million years old, host upon radiant host, and those among them where planets circled unseen and minds yearned outward like his own and the signals winged away, Are you there, are you there, my brother?

He swallowed. His head whirled. He wanted to cast himself on his knees. Now he understood how, once that first faint cry sounded in its receivers, the Foundation for Extraterrestrial Communications was bound to endure, evolve into the Order, outlive wars, famines, pestilences, upheavals, ages of chaos and ages of indifference, kings and peoples and gods. A man asked a question knowing that he would be dust before the answer could come; was this not what made him a man?

"*E-yi. Ya inyah,*" resounded through Roban's hearing. He turned. Aigunov was making gestures at the sky, mumbling some formula. "*Om mani padme hum. Om, om, om.*" He might be a well-drilled spacehand, but down underneath he was a herdsman who shivered when demons galloped overhead on the night wind. *We'll be a long time about shedding the animal in us*, Roban thought.

Anger flared afresh: *Animals like him—walking my homeland with my girl!*

Returning hours later to report—dry-mouthed, sore-eyed, itchy and smelly with perspiration, shaky with fatigue, but borne on a tide of eagerness—he found Luzio talking with Iwan Duna. Roban waited by the door. He could not interrupt a Primary.

The office was cramped and austere. One wall was covered with bookshelves whose volumes had not yet been dusted. Opposite, beneath an air grille, hung a chart of known interstellar links; three centuries of underground darkness and vacuum had left it wonderfully clear, as if for a token of the Order's timelessness. Luzio sat behind a desk, Duna in front. Though he had thrown the embroidered cope of his rank over his coverall, the refer-

ences and papers lay spread before him, the Communicator seemed to be the soldier, erect and correct. The colonel sprawled back in his chair, collar open, malodorous cigar between fingers, tattooed countenance loosely smiling.

"—you succeeded in beaming a message at Kappa Ceti," Luzio said.

"Yass," Duna answered. "Five . . . no, seven years ago. Of course, wit' t'irty-two light-years to cross . . ." He shrugged.

"Have you tried no other star?"

"Not dat I know of. Kappa Ceti iss de closest dat transmits, no?" Lazily: "Unless you know of some closer dat you have not told de world about."

"None," Luizo rapped. "A priori absurd. First a star has to have a life-breathing planet, then intelligence has to evolve, then a civilization has to develop that is willing and able to exchange information with others. Our forebears were surprised to find that, judging from what they learned directly and indirectly, as many as one percent of the main sequence suns qualify—in this galactic neighborhood, at least."

"None of dem have told you how far de network reaches?"

"I doubt any are certain. A message from the center of the galaxy would take thirty thousand years to get here. Longer, actually, since it would have to zigzag between civilizations which could relay it. Under those conditions, one doesn't beam blindly into the wilderness. One holds regular discourse with his nearest available neighbors. Each party passes on what comes in to him from elsewhere. But that takes time itself; first one must *understand* what the newcomers are trying to convey, next put it into terms that one hopes the neighbors will comprehend. Our predecessors have recorded their belief that it is unfeasible to relay past the third or fourth stage of translation. The garbling would become hopeless."

Luizo tugged his beard. "To be sure," he continued,

"man is a baby in this respect. We know the Kappa Cetians have been in the network for some fifty thousand years. To them, it is only yesterday that they finally got a response from us. And others have been sending on the maser beams much longer than them. So our guesses about the system and how it works are apt to be wrong more often than right, I suppose."

"You really have dat much trouble understanding?" Duna blew a smoke ring. "I should t'ink, wit' deir experience, dey would know how to convey information fast to anybody."

"How fast is fast?" Luizo countered. "In two millennia, how many direct exchanges have we had with Kappa Ceti? The largest possible number is thirty-one; and the hiatuses in space, during our mad-dog history, have cost us ten of those chances."

He cocked his head. "Colonel, why are you asking me about things that a school child ought to know?"

Duna laughed. "Because I am not a school child." He lifted a hand. "No, really. I have studied dis part of man's past as closely as odder parts. I have read, and seen in ancient films, how de world jubilated w'en first contact wass made. W'at strikes me as strange is dat it has had so little effect on us. Astronomy, physics, chemistry, planetology, biology . . . science, certain technologies, yas, we learned w'at we did not know, got ideas we might never have t'ought of by ourselves, like de tricky way to make a spaceship dat can really do her own sensing and computing, or de photon drive. But art, religion, politics, matters dat touch de common man w'ere he really lives—no, none, in all dis time. W'y?"

Luizo drew breath. Roban wondered if the Primary really thought the Dominist was ignorant, or was quietly insulting him.

"If nothing else, transmission lag. Oh, yes, one does not proceed on a simple dialogue basis, one sends a long continuous program, even in the initial exploratory signal. But consider what happens when such a signal is acknowledged.

"The acknowledgers have to work out the code. Men had devised theoretical schemes, even before space travel. For instance, a set of on-off pulses could be arranged in a rectangle, each side a prime number of units, and form a crude picture. But in practice—as might have been guessed—the Kappa Cetians did not think that way. It took *them* a human generation to realize that we did not realize they were trying to send us a group of circuit diagrams. Then they had to regress to an elementary level and instruct us in their symbolism—and several times we went astray, which they could not know for thirty-two years—and we, in turn, eventually found out that they did not know we cared about the ecology of their planet . . . Well no matter. You can read the chronicles."

"I have," Duna said. "Not easy for alien minds to mesh. Like you and me, ha?"

Luizo's eyes clashed with his. "Yes, probably."

They noticed Roban. "Come in, Brother," Luizo said. "Be seated. What did you find?"

The Norrestlander placed himself nervously on a chair's edge. "As reported, sir," he answered. "Damage repairable, but will take time and be expensive." He hesitated. "Uh . . . I can't help wondering, sir, if we shouldn't let it go. Now that we're back in the network, or will be, the Others can surely answer our astrophysics questions for us, like ~~they~~ they've done in the past."

"When we knew what questions to ask," Luizo reminded him. He shook his grizzled head. "No, we will always have to do most of our own work. And we don't want to be parasites, either. We have something to tell the universe." He glanced back at Duna. "Concerning the point you raised, there have in fact been transmissions of literally vital importance. I might mention our learning about the variations and analogues of DNA on a number of different planets. You must be aware of the impact that a biological science thus broadened has had on fields like agriculture and medicine, in eras when we have the means to apply the techniques."

In Roban's mind lifted the pictures (heartbreakingly blurred and few) that had finally been sent when the request was finally, perhaps, comprehended. "Intelligent life form" . . . in every case, an equivalent of eyes and hands, or so men assumed, though the shapes were too strange and the accompanying text too meager for identification . . . but were those half-dozen species typical? More pictures should have arrived, after Earth's desire had passed along the network. Unless the theory was right that difference piled upon difference, from race to race, soon choked off the flow. Luizoz himself, in spite of having mentioned it, was skeptical of that theory. Eventually proof or disproof ought to be forthcoming.

Patience. Patience. They've been talking out of Kappa Ceti for fifty thousand years. Elsewhere, we're told, for more than a million. Give us time—but I have no time!

Duna was scowling. "Dat is not w'at I meant." He leaned forward. "You know, I t'ink maybe de reason we got trobble getting humanistic—" his earnestness shattered in a canine laugh—"or nonhumanistic information is, de Odders send to much t'rough robots—cybernets—you know, dey turn de job over to computers."

"That is no new speculation, Colonel," Luizoz told him. "I consider it plausible. Wasn't the original search for extra-Solar intelligence—the beaming and listening—automated by us? It's obvious that the least of the alien civilizations is technologically ahead of us, and far older than any culture of ours has ever lived to become. With that kind of progress behind it, that kind of stability within it, would you not expect affairs to be rationalized, well-ordered, to the point where machines handle all routines?" He smiled. "I rather imagine that the early stages of communication with a race as primitive as ours count as routine."

Duna's good humor vanished. He chewed his cigar. "I don't like it, if dey really are no more interested in us dan dat. We may be less intellectual dan dem, but we are alive, and derefore we must have uniquenesses dey ought

to ask about. Intellect should be de servant of life, not de odder way around."

"Your opinion." Contempt barely edged Luizo's voice.

Duna shook his cigar at the Primary. "And w'at about dis? We humans, soon as we could, we would make ships for going dere to see for ourselves. If dey ar funder along dan us, w'y have dey not come here?"

"Maybe they did, in Earth's prehistoric past," Luizo answered. "Frankly, though, I doubt it. Have you not read the records of our inquiries about astronautics?"

"Yas, but—"

"Why should the Kappans lie to us? They explained that a spacecraft could be build to travel as fast as one-sixth light speed, but the radiation encountered—from the engine and interstellar gas—would pose difficulties." Luizo smiled with scant mirth. "Difficulties! Our own calculations showed that any living organism, behind any feasible shielding, would last less than one hour.

"As for automated probes: in the early days, to the nearest stars, perhaps. But no longer, at least not to stars within the network. Not when so much more information, from so much wider a range, can travel so much faster along the maser beams. I keep telling you, Colonel, those are rational beings out there."

"Maybe you have right." Duna puffed ferociously. "Me, I would not want to be dat rational." He swung to face Roban. "You! You are young. Would you not like to go?"

"Uh—well—" the Norrestlander stammered, "if it's impossible—"

"W'y do you say impossible? W'y not try to find a way around de radiation barrier? Or go off in a slow boat, take a t'ousand years for Alpha Centauri but wait dem out in biostasis along wit' friends and pretty girls. Or at minimum—send dat probe! If not'ing else, live to see television pictures, like people did who watched de first Moon landing and cried for glory. W'y not, Brudder Roban? I would!"

Luizo said bleakly: "The problem is that whenever man has gotten to the point where such an effort could be mounted, some lunatic or some barbarian comes along and smashes him back. We won't be able to reach the stars till we have the stable, rational civilization you affect to despise, Colonel; and then we will be past the need for such children's outings."

Duna flushed. "Or maybe we could," he growled, "maybe we could have already, before I was born—except your precious Order sat on information from de stars dat made it possible, because you felt sure common men could not be trusted wit' dose powers—only you wise Communicators! Yass?"

A clenched fist on the desktop was Luizo's single sign of fury. "That is an old accusation," he said. "I neither admit nor deny it. I do state that no sane person gives a hand grenade to a homicidal maniac. In the present instance—by retaining the key to the language, we have assured that the Order gets back what rightfully belongs to it."

"And to us," Duna replied. "We—we howling, drum-beating, stinking savages—we got men into space again. Not you." He surged to his feet. "Dere are two hundred years' wort' of messages waiting to be translated. You will translate dem for us too. Good day!"

He stormed from the office. Luizo and Roban sat a long while unspeaking.

"Well," said the elder at last, "you need a shower and change of clothes before dinner. And I suggest you go to bed immediately afterward. I want you ready for work come mornwatch, and you look exhausted."

"I'm not really, sir, and anyway I'm too keyed up to sleep right off." Roban shifted in his chair. "Uh, that message the Baikalans sent to Kappa Ceti. Have you seen the record of it? Was it really no more than an invitation to resume transmissions?"

"Yes." Teeth gleamed wolf-white in Luizo's beard. "I wonder if the Kappans will be puzzled, or merely amused,

when it reaches them. After that gap of three centuries, to start afresh in a completely obsolete symbolism!"

Roban must needs chuckle. Because the Order had trained him in machinery and circuitry rather than in semantics, he found himself briefly reviewing the linguistic problem.

A signal comes in, unmistakably modulated by an artifice of intelligence. But what is the code? What meaning is intended? You have your own ideas about how to establish a common language—beginning with mathematics, say, and progressing to physics and chemistry—but is that an obvious approach to the mind at the other end of the maser beam? In point of fact, as Luizo had told Duna, it was not. The Kappa Cetians assumed that humans naturally thought in digital and quantum-physical terms. For instance, the original Foundation was slow to realize that in a certain pattern they were not sending a geometrical theorem but a statement of Planck's law.

In their turn, the Kappans appeared confused at first by man's binary patterns which specified pictures. When they did get the idea, they returned drawings full of physical-science information, such as the layout of their planetary system and the detailed structure of its members. Biology was for centuries confined to the molecular level; they had trouble grasping that men could be interested in natural history or the very looks of another thinking race; and at the date of the last collapse of human civilization they had not yet, apparently, deduced that they were being asked for an account of their own past, their culture, art, religion, any matter transcending the material universe.

Either word spread that Sol had joined the network, or independent attempts at contact finally began to be received. At any rate, there were exchanges with other stars. They being still further off than Kappa Ceti, still less progress had been made. But the difficulties looked curiously similar—as if the human mentality differed radically from some galactic norm.

"Quite likely true," Luizo had once remarked to Roban.

"Machine civilization—which one must have for interstellar communication—presupposes order, rationality, a logic which must be the same throughout the cosmos. We are infants. Give us a few thousand years of peace and sanity, and we will doubtless be thinking like the Others."

"I'm not sure I'd want that, sir," the novice, as he was then, had answered. "Not caring about . . . oh, outings in the woods, good food, beer, girls, games, books, music . . . only science and efficiency; it doesn't seem right."

Luizo had shrugged. "You will be dead well before it's happened, son." Gravely: "It won't be like that anyhow. A static society, with everything automated that we would call work, sounds like living death to you. But you have been conditioned by war, poverty, toil, misery, the whole cruel, pointless rise-and-fall we know as history. Once that has ended, we will be free to live for the things that really matter."

"If that's right, sir, then why aren't the Others telling us about those things?"

"Probably because they feel the mutual symbolism is inadequate thus far. Be patient; that is what the Order deals in, patience."

And in the course of lifetimes, information exchange did evolve toward precision and completeness. With Kappa Ceti alone was the code approaching a true language; but given it for a guide, the development with other contacts ought to be faster. Furthermore, the sheer amount of accumulated material was becoming sufficiently great to permit considerable analysis; for example, several binary-chart "sketches" could be combined to form one fairly clear picture.

But meanwhile tension mounted between Great Asia and the Empire of the Americas; Midafrica was torn by civil strife; a militant new religion was preached on Mars and found converts on Earth; again demagogues assured starveling masses that their wretchedness was due to somebody else's greed; the scope and weaponry of border wars increased; ever more carriers of nuclear explosive

crouched underground, prowled sea and sky and space. This would not be the first dark age the Order had seen, nor the first time that its Directors considered unpropitious for the release of possibly transmitted technical data.

Accordingly, the newest development in interstellar linguistics were not published. Secular authorities who monitored the messages from Outside were as puzzled as the Communicators claimed to be. And when the upheaval came, Earth was not burned sterile.

For three hundred years, a succession of a few trusted masters of the Order kept secret that a key existed to those last dispatches to arrive before the catastrophe, and those which had come in while no one was there to read the recordings of them.

Roban was told, after Luizoz selected him to come. Now he leaned forward and whispered in the Primary's ear, "Should you mention you know what the renegade brothers didn't? This room may be bugged."

"No doubt it is," Luizoz answered aloud. "You forget, though, the Domination government *has* been advised that I possess information that was never made public. They don't know what it is, of course; if they did, you and I would not be here."

Beneath his facade, he likewise stiffened. "I cannot just project the taped messages on a screen and read them like a book, you understand. We are not that far along. No, it remains a question of interpretation, of finding sets of possible meanings that look mutually consistent. You will have work, Roban, never fear. Dog work such as frequency analyses on particular symbol clusters. Let me illustrate."

He took pencil and paper and scribbled. Roban waited. He wondered why Luizoz should repeat what he had spent the past year studying. The room felt very silent.

The Primary handed him the sheet. His heart jumped.

I dared not tell you this before. You are no actor, and your manner might have given hints

to the Baikal secret agents who surely checked on you after I selected you. But there are no such specialists on the Moon, and in any event you can be expected to show excitement under present circumstances.

I may indeed find something in those tapes that should not be revealed. What we have on Earth is harmless, but we cannot predict what is here. Yet I am required to turn in a full translation, with an account of the system I used, and this will be carefully scrutinized by Dominist experts.

With the help of certain colleagues, I have prepared and memorized a false system. It is close enough to the real one that most interpretations will be plausible and even correct. However, to give you an example: toward the end, the Kappans stopped sending numbers in binary and saved time by switching to a duodecimal base. In the false system, the new base is said to be ten. That would make it impossible to build any machine that might be described for us. It is unlikely the deception will be suspected, when the most honest and competent readings always contain so many ambiguities. The Order can "explain" the difficulty as doubtless due to a misunderstanding, promise to send a request for clarification, and thus delay matters for at least 64 years, during which many things can happen.

Therefore, do not express surprise if you see me proceed in a way that your own knowledge of the data makes you think must be erroneous. And, while I trust no crisis will arise, be prepared to act in an emergency with the strength and courage for which I chose you.

Luizo's gaze gripped Roban's. "Do you see what I mean?" he asked.

The techno nodded. His neck was stiff, his palms wet. "Y-yes, sir. Absolutely."

"Good." Luizo laid the paper in an ashtray, touched a lighter to it, and watched it burn. "We will commence right after breakfast," he said. The flame went out. He stirred the blackened remnants, breaking them up, mingling them with the ash from Duna's cigar. "You really must go make yourself presentable, Brother. Never forget, we represent the Order."

The sun rose slowly to blazing Lunar noon. A week later, night was falling on Farside.

Roban was scarcely conscious of time. Luizo worked him too hard. As translation progressed, he must continually reprogram the computers. (They, and the associated scanners, projectors, cross-comparison playbacks, memory banks, every piece of paraphernalia, were the reason for working on the Moon. In former days, the information could simply have been transmitted to Earth, where a parallel team used the facilities of Alpine Station. But the dark-age Mechanoclasts had dynamited it.) And he was put to uncreative but necessary tasks like tracking down previous appearances of a given configuration or drawing up probability matrices. He grew red-eyed and **insomniac**.

He didn't resent it. The Primary was laboring more heavily . . . and growing more taut and taciturn for every watch that went by. Clearly the translation, as it developed, was revealing something of major import. But Luizo uttered no hint of what it might be, and kept his notes in a private cipher.

Neither man saw much of the Baikalans. A few soldiers were posted with them. Besides keeping guard, they kept house. The Primary, who spoke their language, could have gotten their help, for whatever that was worth, if he asked. But the longest sentence he gave them was a conveyance of Roban's desire for a bit of variety in the

Asian food. The cook tried to oblige, with no great success.

Duna was gone. His assignment was only concerned in part with star talk. Mainly he was on the project of expanding his country's military bases on Nearside. In one of his rare conversational moods, Luizo remarked what a prostitution of engineering that was. Roban nodded, though his own wish was that those could have been Norrestlander installations.

The colonel returned about sunset and inquired what had been accomplished. Luizo snapped, "Messages, long ones loaded with information, came in at intervals for two centuries before the Kappans gave up. Each included a further evolution of the code itself. Did you think I would have them read in two weeks?"

"You got any idea w'en you finish?" Duna asked mildly. "Our stores are limited, you know."

"Perhaps another fortnight. Mind you, I won't have a proper text then. I will simply have done everything I can with the apparatus here, so that I may as well take the material back to Earth for continued study. If you are in a hurry, Colonel, I suggest you stop delaying me yourself."

Duna guffawed and left the laboratory.

Several hours afterward, he found Roban alone. Luizo had finally needed a little sleep. The assistant did too, but his nerves were overly stretched—*What is turning the old man so . . . grim? intense? exalted*—and he wandered into the observation lounge hoping the view would relax him.

The sun disc had gone behind a supply bunker. A plume of zodiacal light rose pearly over that black outline. Occasional ridges on the crater floor still caught the glow, and the spaceship was a burning spear, but otherwise shadows had engulfed the land. It was, naturally, a simulacrum on a hemispherical screen that Roban saw; a dome would soon have been etched useless by micro-meteorites. But the realism was absolute. You rarely got

a presentation that fine on Earth these days, and nowhere an omnisensory program.

I wonder what life was getting to be like . . . would have become like, if the collapse hadn't happened, he thought. No need to go anyplace, when any experience you might want is brought to you, nor to do anything when you need only issue an order to a machine that might be at the antipodes.

He felt the weariness that slumped his shoulders and wished briefly for that lost ease. Then looked at his big fisherman's hands and wondered what he could use them for in such a world.

Hobbies, I suppose. My brain would do my real work. . . . Or would it? Self-programming computers could direct the machines better. In fact, at last the system would get so complicated that you wouldn't dare let flesh and blood meddle with it.

Arts, philosophies, the spiritual explorations Luizo talks about?

Well, maybe for him, but I'm afraid I'd be no good at them, especially if every piece of information I had was provided for me by the system. That's the trouble with organized perfection. No surprises.

His gaze went to the stars where they stood in darkness. *Is that why their people communicate? For newness? But why haven't they--* The sense of their isolation, and his own, stabbed him with cold.

Anticlimax, a whiff of cigar smoke called his attention back. Duna had entered the lounge. The Baikalan smiled. "Salutation, techno," he said.

"Brother, if you please," Roban corrected him annoyedly. "My title is Brother of the Order. 'Techno' is a job designation."

"Excuse. I am a roughneck steppe dweller. We tend to t'ink of a person in terms of w'at he does." Duna's stumpy bowlegs carried him less gracefully across the floor than Roban had become able to move in this gravity. "You admire de scene?"

"Yes." *When are you going?*"

Duna took stance beside him. "Dat is not common for my folk. We live too close to nature, most of us, even today, for seeing it as a subject for poetry or tourism. I doubt you did, eider, w'en you was a sailor boy. Dese days you live more comfortable, more intellectual, and it gets different. Maybe my grandchildren, dey have a Horace or a Virgil."

"A what?" The question escaped Roban's determination to snub the other.

"Roman poets of de late Republic and early Principate." Duna cocked his glance upward at the bigger man. "You don't follow?"

"No. I, uh, I believe I've heard mention of an empire a long time ago, but—" *He won't lord it over my education too!* "—my business is with more important things."

"Ah, dere you make your mistake, my friend. Not'ing is more important. W'ere does de future come from if not de past? W'at is de present more dan deir intersection point? A wise man said in Old America, dose who will not learn history are condemned to repeat it."

Duna laid a hand on Roban's arm. "Here, let us settle and talk," he urged. The cigar wagged between his lips.

"I have to sleep."

"Maybe you do your Order and your home country some good if you hear w'at I got to tell you."

Maybe. Can't hurt, I suppose. Roban lowered himself into a chair. The ancient unholstery crackled. Duna sat down to confront him. "Well?"

"Oh, relax. W'y can we not treat each odder like gentlemen, w'edder or not we agree?"

Roban felt himself blush, and resented it, but managed to nod and lean back.

"I imagine," Duna said, "you wonder w'y a military man like me, a clansman who lives by de Yasa of his ancestors and worships very honest at deir graves each year w'en he goes home for de Grand Hunt—w'h he should know anyt'ing about w'at happened t'ousands of years gone?"

He blew his customary smoke ring. "I tell you," he said. "I got lots of chances for reading. Military life is mostly waiting around, es-specially in peacetime. I am interested. But besides, de Domination tries hard for its officers to keep on learning after dey have left school." His laugh barked. "Partly, yas, we feel shy over being less cultured dan various of our client peoples." Quickly serious again: "However, we got a practical need. We do not want to blunder blind into horrible mistakes like earlier nations did. For having any chance of saving ourselves from dat, we need leaders who can t'ink as well as act. And how can you t'ink unless you know t'ings to t'ink about?"

Roban frowned. He remembered the cries of "Asian barbarians," and unkempt little men in dusty vehicles, and—well, yes, it had been surprising how many of them played a musical instrument; and the Protector had started night classes for them in Seattle, and later for the provincial garrisons. . . . Not that they were any band of geniuses. Far from it. But the lowliest herdboy-turned-grease-monkey respected any educated person.

He met the oblique eyes and said, "You might give a bit of your thought to what becomes of aggressors."

"We do, we do," Duna answered. "Let's not get into de rights and wrongs of our war wit' Norrestland. We say you was making border trobble for us in Alaska, and egging de Tundra Runners on to raid us, and many odder t'ings your government maybe denied. Fact is, dough, your foreign policy was tied to dat of our Latino rivals. And . . . we are not such bad bosses, are we? Before long, Norrestlanders will start getting offered Baikalan citizenship—w'ich will not mean dey have to quit deir own ways of living."

"Until they're told to march out and help conquer the Latinos for you."

"Dey won't be. Not if it can be avoided. Dat is one lesson we draw from de past. An empire gets spread too t'in, like de British, and it evaporates. On de odder hand, de Romans stopped too soon. Dey could have taken Ger-

many, soudern Russia, and de Near East; and dey should have, because dat was w'ere deir later enemies came from. Rome might den have lasted longer dan Egypt of de Pharaohs, and a better world dan ours might have grown up inside de framework. Could hardly be worse, no?"

Roban shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"And still you put your judgment against mine?" Duna replied, turning severe. "Besides, you was supposed to have renounced national ties w'en you joined de Order."

"Well—you can't expect a man to . . . I've family there—"

Duna watched him narrowly. "I have got reports," he said. "I have seen for myself. Luizo did not pick de best trained assistant he was personally acquainted wit'; he picked de one wit' de best reason to hate de Domination. And he would not wear de mask he does if he was simply learning details about how anodder planet is put to-gedder."

Roban swallowed. "Your, uh, your government will get the information when we've worked it out ourselves."

"For certain? Brudder, I have been trying to make you see you should cooperate wit' us. Now I tell you plain, you better do it. De Domination wants to be just, but de justice is strict."

"I don't know anything!" the techno almost shouted. "He hasn't told me!" He realized the implications. "That is . . . no point in him telling me at the, the present stage of things. He's the only man here who can—" *Go on the offensive, for God's sake.* "If your government wanted faster results, it could have brought more than one top-ranker."

"Wit' dat many more chances for trickery?" The tone was a whipcrack.

After a moment, however, Duna smiled and said quite gently: "Please t'ink on it. Ask Primary Luizo to t'ink. You may not like us Baikalans much, but at de last, we are human beings wit' you." He waved around the dome.

The sun was entirely down, nothing except that misty half-lens of zodiacal light to interrupt the awful majesty of the stars. "If dis shell around us breaks, we are dead. Dat is a big and strange cosmos out yonder, and it was not made for us; we were made for a single tiny corner of it. Do not take chances wit' our corner."

He rose. "Goodnight," he said and departed.

The Great Bear walked slowly over heaven. When Roban donned earphones to examine the audio component of a message, he would hear the dry, random rustle and hiss that were the stars' way of talking to each other. Once the radioscope had eavesdropped on it and the computers had translated what was heard into discourse of bursting atoms and ghost-thin nebulae and cosmic rays spiraling down light-years-long magnetic lines. But that was before anger and valor drowned reason on Earth.

In another generation, perhaps again.

Luizo began finding less for his helper to do, as the possible manipulations of available data grew exhausted. Roban was not glad. He didn't want leisure to fret over why his chief worked ever more feverishly and withdrew ever deeper into himself. The Norrestlander arranged a few excursions outside, gliding dreamily along the crater floor or riding a moonbuggy to the ringwall for a climb up those gaunt steepes. The trips refreshed him less than expected, and the company of Dominist soldiers was not the cause. He was longing for home—Earth: manhome—gray walls and grave courtyards, gardens, bells at dusk, where Australia Station kept watch from a high hill over intensely green croplands; or gurgle and glitter on Puget Sound, lulling winds, flying gulls and flying sails, little red-roofed villages on the strand beneath pinewoods, odor of smoke and a friendly hail and the brave striding of girls.

Night wore away toward another furnace sunrise. And Luizo said: "We are through here, I believe. We can best finish on Earth. I want to consult my colleagues."

His spare face moved only in the lips, from which the words issued metallic. Roban's heart stumbled.

A call flew from peak to peak to relay satellite to peak until it reached Duna at the base whither he had returned. The colonel's reply was prompt: "Optimum time for raising ship, twenty-nine hours hence. Let count-down begin. I will come bid farewell in person."

Luizo interpreted this for Roban when the officer in charge told him about it at dinner. "For my part," the Primary said, "I shall mostly sleep." His back was slumped, his eyes and cheeks sunken, as if he were hollowed out . . . but by a flame within that was only burning low, that would not die.

When they had eaten, he and Roban sought the laboratory to collect their transcriptions, calculations, ciphered notes, and conclusions. Luizo always took them with him when he went to rest, and never left them alone for any significant length of time. "You may wipe the memory banks of our computers," he said.

"What? But . . ." Roban gulped. The Dominators' scientists could be almost as indignant at losing those marks along the trail the Communicators had followed, as they would have been at destruction of the message reels themselves.

"I said for you to clear the memory banks." Luizo's voice rose. "To avoid needless duplication where data storage space is short."

That's a command, Roban knew.

Well . . . presumably no one will realize it's been done till we're safely back in Australia. And even if they do, what of it? We need merely claim we took the procedure for granted. Relations are strained enough between Domination and Order that the Baikalans can't afford to consider it a provocative act.

And it'll do them one in the eye.

He laughed. Leaning close: "Sir, can't you tell me now what—"

"No," Luizo said. "The interpretation remains clouded."

His thumb jerked toward the wall. *Wait till we're home. Here we too likely have electronic listeners.*

"I, uh, understand, sir." Roban carried the boxes of material to the room the Communicators shared. Luizo reminded him about his key; he had forgotten it once, and found that the Primary had locked him out. Returning to the lab, the techno spent an hour making the erasures.

That left him likewise weary. He started for the wash-room closest to his doss. Rounding a corner, he almost collided with a blocky form. "Oh! H-h-hello, Colonel."

Duna smiled. "Salutation, Brudder. I just got in. Was hoping to catch you two at work. Dey told me you was."

"I . . . have finished." *Thank the fates!* "My superior has already turned in."

"Would you like a drink? I brought a bottle of good gin. Not vodka, gin."

Roban was tempted. But no—not with the enemy—and they'd have taken it in the lounge, which meant sitting under those icily strange stars. "I'd better hold off. You, well, you might tell them not to call us for breakfast but leave some food on standby. We both need ten or twelve hours' rest."

"And blastoff soon after. Very well, as you wish. I will see you before you leave. Nice dreams." Duna waved and continued down the corridor with his horseman's gait.

Roban stared a moment at his back. *Hoy, I did accept a favor from him after all, didn't I?*

Not important. People weren't machines; relationships between them, or between aspects of themselves, had nothing of machine simplicity and invariance.

Nonetheless, the fact that he couldn't really hate Duna—nor really love the whole of mankind—bothered him. And what was in those sendings from Outside, that both troubled and uplifted Luizo?

Sleepiness fled. *Another wakeful nightwatch*, Roban groaned to himself. *God, I can't wait to live again the way men were meant to live!* No caging underground

sameness, exterior deadly barrenness; no days which were nothing but symbols and calculators; wind, rain, green grass and thunderous surf, music and ceremonies and tales of desperate bravery, falling in love and children running to meet you, jokes, games, the billion tiny illogicalities of a human existence. Those brought peace.

He let himself into the bunkroom, remembering to re-lock the door. Luizo had written to him, early in the project, that this was crucial to keeping the papers safe. Roban saw why they must be guarded. Given a chance to photocopy a full record of the Communicators' work, the Dominists could eventually read it; no cipher is unbreakable. And if the masters of the Order should decide to turn in a false report . . . None of the Baikalans had objected, or made any remark concerning the secretive-ness. Roban had speculated that they might plan on arresting him and Luizo, acquiring the material by force. No, he concluded, that would bring the ban down on their realm; and they could ill afford to let their rivals enjoy the Order's exclusive services.

The room was a cubicle, sparsely furnished. The sole decorations on its dull gray walls were the official medal-lion Luizo had hung, four stars linked by trains of waves, and the time-blurred portrait of an unknown woman and child which Roban had sentimentally left in place. A ventilator gusted air that felt a little chill when he removed his clothes; no matter how far they ranged, men did best to take the cycles of mother Gaea with them. Its murmur was soft in his ears. Luizo looked oddly shrunken and helpless, asleep with one thin arm laid over the blanket.

Roban chinned into the upper bunk, turned off the light, and tried to compose himself. Useless. He did not thresh about, for any position is comfortable in low-weight. But too many questions moved inside his head.

Three or four hours had passed when the door opened.

The entry was most quiet. Roban's first intimation was

a faint brightening on his lids. He blinked, and saw a line of wan illumination from the hall. *What the demons?* He half sat up. The crack widened and a silhouette appeared within.

They . . . yes, why didn't we think of it, of course they'd have duplicate keys and combinations. Roban rolled over to face the entrance and watched through slitted eyes. He hoped his breathing stayed regular and his heart did not hammer audibly. It prickled along scalp and backbone.

The intruder stepped through and reclosed the door. There was an instant's blackness. A stopped-down flash-beam glowed. Reflections picked Duna's countenance out as a few bony highlights and a glitter of watchfulness.

He padded across the floor and squatted by the lower bunk. Roban risked leaning over the side for a look. Duna held the flash between his knees. One hand grasped a pressure container. From it snaked a tube ending in a bell mouth, that his other hand was bringing toward Luiz.

Roban had done battle in waterfront brawls, and hunted bear with crossbows while the Domination still forbade guns to Norrestlanders, and ridden out gales of Cape Flattery. Only later did he recognize that what flared in him now was less rage than joy.

He swung himself outward in an arc that landed him behind Duna. The colonel heard the thud, bounded erect and sought to whirl around. Roban caught him in a full nelson. Duna hissed an oath, writhed with astonishing power, and kicked. Pain coursed through Roban's bare shin. He held firm, stood on his unhurt leg and wrapped the other around both of Duna's. "Gotcha, you bastard!" he grunted.

Duna pressed the trigger on his can. A sickly-sweet whiff reached Roban's nostrils. For a second his mind spun, his muscles loosened, and Duna broke free.

A shadow among shadows, the Baikalan snatched for his pistol. Another shadow arose, Luiz, awakened by

Roban's massive body striking the bunkframe. The Primary lunged. "I've caught . . . his gun hand. Help!"

Roban shook his head. The giddiness went away. He found the dropped flash and played its beam over the struggle. Duna had lost his pressure can. He wrenched to break Luizo's grip. The old man hung on.

Roban trod forward. His fist smote. The violence of the blow erupted in his own shoulder. Duna's head snapped back. He fell, with the peculiar, buckling Lunar slowness, and did not move.

For a while murk was, and harsh breath.

Luzio groped to the light switch. The fluorescence seemed bright as topside day. Roban hunkered over Duna. "Is he dead?" The Primary's question sounded as if from an interstellar distance.

"No. Sock to the chin. He should rouse in a minute or two." Roban heaved the Baikalan into the lower bunk.

Luzio peered out. "Nobody else in sight." He shut the door.

"What's this about?" Roban demanded.

"Obvious." Luizo's crisp calm was restored. He stooped for the can, shot the least jet from the tube, and sniffed. "Yes, pentacycline. A common anesthetic. We would have been unwakeable for several hours, while he duplicated our material and put it back. If tomorrow we suspected, what proof could we bring? I should have anticipated the possibility. You did well, Brother. We may never dare speak publicly of such an incident, but I will commend you to the right people."

At another time Roban might have glowed. On this night he could ask merely, "What do we do next?"

Luizo's dryness restored a measure of balance: "You might start by removing his knife and gun."

Roban hastened to obey. The pistol felt oddly heavy in his grasp. Luizo peered at the colonel. "Ah," he murmured, "he is reviving. Let us see if we can't utilize the initial confusion."

Duna's lids fluttered. He uttered a moaning sound. Luizo asked him a question in Baikalan. He mumbled and tried

to sit. Luizo gave him a jet of gas and, as he sagged, snapped and other inquiry. Duna mused an answer and lay back.

Luizo straightened. "He says he came alone, without notifying his fellows. I will assume that is true. Primitive though our narcosynthesis is, we have nothing better, do we?"

More than ever, he appeared like a hawk stooping on prey. And a tingling went along Roban's own veins. Here finally was a time when men must decide and act . . . not any damned machine!

"Let us get dressed," Luizo said. "We want the maximum psychological advantage. He is a tough one."

"What can we do, sir? I mean, he—"

"At worst," Luizo clipped, "we can kill him, move the corpse elsewhere, and hope the death passes for accident or suicide."

Roban was momentarily appalled. "Sir! Is the . . . the issue . . . that important?"

"More." Luizo paused. "I trust murder won't be necessary. The risks are high, not to speak of the moral dilemma." He tugged his beard. "The Domination itself is surely unwilling to run certain other risks. We can try to use that fact. . . . Dress, Brother, and fetch a glass of water. He will need it."

That walk down the hall was the longest Roban had taken. Yet he encountered no soul. The hour stood at midnight over Lake Baikal, and the corridor on this level reached as empty as if nothing remained on the Moon except the unseen, susurrating machines.

When he came back, Duna was hunched on the bunk edge, elbows on knees, face in hands. Luizo offered him the tumbler and, in addition, a tablet from his personal medikit. "Take this. A stimulant and pain killer. You will feel more like yourself."

The colonel did. Presently the slackness left his mouth, the haziness his eyes. Though a bruise had already begun to show among the tattoos on his jaw, he sat

straight. Luizoz confronted him from the single chair. Roban loomed behind, gun in belt.

"Well," Duna said across the quietness. "You gave me a hard welcome."

"We may have overreacted," Luizoz said. "However—" He pointed to the can where it lay on the floor.

Duna grinned, winced, and doggedly repeated the grin.

"An embarrassing situation, right? On bot' sides, I t'ink. W'en I do not soon notify my men I am safe—"

"I doubt your men will worry before mornwatch, Colonel."

Duna stayed motionless. "Ah. Yas. I remember now, from barely awake. . . . You should have been an intelligence officer, Primary."

"Thank you. I assume you are?"

"Not as a regular, or I might have worked more smoot'. Dey figured me for de best qualified man to deal wit' you because I am in a technical corps, and speak not only Inglis but your home language, Primary, w'ich I suspect is de language of your ciphered notes."

Luizoz raised brows in an otherwise impassive visage. "Then you have already spied?"

"Glimpses. You gave no chance for more. I had no specific orders, you understand. I was to act at discretion, depending on how you behaved. W'en you showed bad fait', well, I did w'at looked better dan provoking a crisis. I went ahead by myself, for not making any later scandal."

"Why do you accuse us of bad faith? I have explained that translation will be a long-drawn-out process, and that the Order has always been reluctant to announce conclusions until certain they are not premature."

Duna sighed. "Don't let's make insults. You know my government can keep its mout' shut. It would not have assigned me if I could not. You could have told me of your tentative ideas. You did not even tell your assistant."

"Because you might have planted recording devices on us—which you have, in effect, just admitted doing." Luizoz

stabbed a lean finger at the Baikalan. "What sort of faith does that show?"

Duna scowled. "Credit me wit' having t'ought about w'at I observed."

"I admit I underestimated you," Luizo said. "Shall we call the game quits?"

"No." Watching Duna, Roban suddenly recalled a cougar he had seen readying to pounce.

The attack, when it came, was in words.

"W'en is de Kappan ship arriving?"

"What?" Roban cried. Luizo sat frozen-faced, but hands clenched tight on the arms of his chair.

Duna leaned forward. Triumph blazed from him. "In about sixty years," he said. "Dat is a pretty good estimate, no?"

Through a noise of exploding suns, Roban heard Luizo say—for the first time, weakly—"You must be insane. What gave you any such idea?"

"I tell you." Duna rose. He might not yet have been able to do that under terrestrial weight. Here, though, he stood over the Primacy, with legs planted wide, and Roban wondered how the story had ever started that Orientals are expressionless. His hands darted to and fro while he spoke, machine gun fashion.

"I t'ought from your behavior, you must be reading more easy dan you pretended, and it was terrible w'at you read but glorious too. Maybe a weapon you could use for conquering de Solar System? Not likely. Men already got lots; and de Order is not structured for conquering; and anyway, it loks like de star folk don't make war on demselves like us. It has always been men w'at took ideas from de stars and turned dem to war use, like a photon-drive battleship. Right? Well, maybe you saw a doomsday machine in de latest information—but den you should have showed plain fear.

"W'at was a better guess? Well, suppose I was in charge at Kappa Ceti. I would t'ink, here are dese creatures at Sol. Dey don't play question and answer like

anybody else; dey are slow to grasp many ideas, and interested in odd subjects like botany and zoology; yas, dey are very strange. Sometimes dey actually stop transmitting for decades or centuries. Dis last breakoff . . . maybe de final message received spoke of a hurricane coming? I t'ink likely so. De last men here before dey evacuated it and went home to die, would dey not have wanted to send a cry across de light-years, 'Remember us'?"

Luizo's gaze dropped. "Yes," he whispered.

The Baikalan pressed his advantage. "Question is, was de language so well developed by den dat de cry could be even half understood? W'edder it could or not, how else to learn de inwardness of dis peculiar race, after it falls silent for w'at might be forever—how else, except go in person?"

Luizo rallied and looked back up. "On what basis do you say your hypothetical ship will arrive in six decades?"

"T'irty-two light-years between. Records show dey sent a reply to de final message from us, and tried again w'en dey got no answer, because deir own last word came in here about a hundred years ago. Well, I allow maybe ten years after de second one drew blank, for building de ship and accelerating to full speed and so on. Dat fits in wit' de date dat last transmission was received, surely announcing dey was on deir way. At one-sixt' light velocity, dey will get here w'en I told you."

Luizo sat in a silence where Roban counted pulsebeats.

Until the Primary said: "The arrival date they gave is fifty-eight years hence."

Duna leaned on the bunkframe and let out a whistling breath.

Almost of itself, the gun moved from Roban's belt and centered on the Baikalan. "Stay where you are, Colonel," said a voice.

Duna congealed.

"What is this, Brother?" Luizo asked, sadly more than surprisedly, and not leaving his seat.

"Can we let him go, sir?" Roban replied.

Duna showed emotion only in the squaring of his shoulders. "I t'ink you damn better," he said.

"Dare we, sir?" Roban begged. "Whether or not we have to die for his death? If the Domination expects them, it'll arrange to meet them alone—tell them lies—get them on its side—"

Duna spoke softly: "W'ereass, if you reach dem first, you can hope for deir help in making independent Norrestland. Or maybe a Norrestlander Empire?"

Roban's aim never wavered. But his tones did. "No! Simple freedom—for everybody . . ." The terror that had made him draw the gun began to fade. "Though maybe it d-d-doesn't matter what we do, we three to-night," he said. "A civilization that old, without war, in touch with its kind across how many light-years . . . they've got to be wise, benign, unfoolable. They've got to come as teachers and liberators—don't they?"

Now Luizo climbed to his feet. He stayed out of the line of fire, but hardened his stare upon Duna. "What I fear," he said, "is a hysterical attempt—by your country, by anyone—to destroy the Kappans as they enter the Solar System. It might succeed. They might not suspect defenses are needed. At best, imagine six decades of wrangling, intriguing, probably fighting, over which band of glorified apes shall have the right to meet the Galactic Ancients with what empty pomposities!"

Tall in his robe, he told them both, "One human institution alone is conceivably fit to be man's representative before them. It is for this that the Order of Communicators has existed."

Silence anew, until Roban wondered wildly at the back of his head if the buzzing he heard there was, somehow, the talk between the stars.

Iwan Duna's eyes sought his. "You have read little history, Brudder," he said, almost caressingly. "But you must know legends, you must have imagination. I could

tell you how de barbarians overran China or Rome to help one faction against anodder, de English India in deir turn, after deir ancestors took first Britain and den Ireland, how Cortez had native allies dat hated de Aztecs, how de Jovian moon colonies lost deir freedom—oh, over and over, always strangers getting into internecine wars. You can read de books later, dough. Tonight, Roban, t'ink, only t'ink. How easier can conquest happen and *everybody* come under de yoke—dan by one side asking for alliance? Divide and conquer—and dis time de conquerors will not be your fellow men!”

Luizo flung back: “You make the paranoid assumption that a single spaceship represents a menace.”

“She does,” Duna said, “wit’ de knowledge aboard, if we let her.”

“You cannot accept that the Kappans are above such infantile games as conquest?”

“‘Conquest’ is maybe de wrong word,” Duna replied. “Maybe dey t’ink of it as ‘help,’ like evangelists bringing a true fait’ to de pagans wit’ fire and sword, or a technologically advanced society choking a pastoral one by sheer weight of economics.”

He folded his arms. “Primary,” he said, “you could argue for holding de facts from me. But do you mean to keep from Roban de true nature of de Kappans? He could live to see dem come.”

Luizo smote first in palm and said, “Brother, you are right. We have to take care of this man, at whatever cost.”

“You can kill me,” Duna said, “but den you cannot hear me. Roban, does it mean not’ing to you dat dis ship is traveling at one-sixt’ light speed?”

“Be still,” Luizo said.

“He has de gun,” Duna reminded them.

“I am your superior—” Luizo began, but Duna’s voice overrode.

“Organic life cannot survive de radiation. We learned

dat. No reason to believe dere were any lies. W'at can, den? Robots. Dat ship is crewed by robots. Computer brains, machine effectors, I don't know how dey work but I do know dey got to be machines."

"And what of it?" Luizo trod toward Duna. The colonel caught his wrist and stopped him, while keeping attention wholly on Roban and saying, in quick merciless words:

"Maybe organic beings would do it dat way. Not impossible. We would, if we had no choice.

"T'ink further, dough, my friend. W'y is every planet de Order has contacted or been told about—a tiny sample, but consistent—w'y is all but ours so uniform? W'y do dey not take for granted we are interested in living creatures? W'y do dey use computer and physics symbolisms always? W'y never a sign of dat irrational t'ing we call de spirit?

"Oh, yas, you got a few pictures w'at you suppose are of intelligent animals . . . finally, casually, a sop to your odd curiosity. Maybe dose animals are not extinct yet—everyw'ere. Maybe on some worlds dey survive, tame, in small numbers—but makes no difference. Dey are obsolete, dey are being phased out, not by any dramatic revolt of de robots but by de logic of de machine civilizations dey demselves had founded.

"In de end—seems like in dis part of de galaxy, at least—technological society ends inevitable wit' replacing silly, limited organic life by efficient computers and robots. Dey t'ink, yas; dey have awareness, curiosity, a kind of creativity; but all else we care about is dead and forgotten."

Duna swung upon. Luizo. "Primary," he rasped, "obviously de Kappans have realized dat we are not machines. W'en dey come, do you hope dey will give us dat same Nirvana?"

Caught in the manacled grasp, the Communicator wet his lips and got out: "He's crazy, Roban. We must si-

lence him. Man isn't enslaved, is he? What danger have we ever been in . . . except from our own lunacies?"

"Maybe dose lunacies are w'at save us," Duna said. "De odder races dat dwell on odder planets, maybe dey are more logical and meek dan de wild hunter man. We get so far in civilization, and den we feel de walls closing in and we revolt."

"And smash the world and start over," Luizoz retorted. "Would you keep us forever bound to that wheel?"

"I did not say so," Duna answered, calmer now. "I do not say, eider, we should attack de ship. No, no. Let us be very careful, but let us also learn w'at we can . . . and den, maybe, fare out among de stars and prove on behalf of our poor gone kinsfolk dat once loved and hated and feared and longed like us . . . fare out and prove w'at life can do."

Luizoz disengaged himself and turned to Roban. "I do not necessarily advocate anything else," he said. "In fact, it would be folly to try to predict in advance what the Kappan robots can bring us, for good or ill. I do say that none but the Communicators are fit to deal with them."

"Yas," Duna said, "de little, ingrown, order-worshipping Order. No fishermen, no clansmen, no patriots, nobody w'at cares about his ancestors no poets, no warriors, no lovers, only intellectuals talking wit' machines. Should not de whole of mankind meet dem and decide w'at destiny dey want for deir children?"

"With the Domination of Baikal—your country's oppressor, Roban—their self-appointed spokesman?" Luizoz challenged.

"We have fifty-eight years to change dat," Duna said. Then he waited.

After the tears had started to blind him, Roban stammered, "Sir, we . . . we can't murder, we can't take sides. It's not in our t-t-tradition." His hand shook so badly that he had trouble giving Duna back knife and pistol.

The colonel holstered them and said, "I feel no need to

tell w'at has happened between us, after you give me your full report tomorrow."

"I suppose not," Luizo could barely be heard. "Good-night to you. Eternally returning night."

"How else can dere be sunrises?" Duna asked, and left the Communicators alone.

3 *Fables: Three*

THE MAN ON THE HILL

Michael Fayette

The man, who was the last, stood at the exit to the shelter that had successfully kept him alive for nearly a century. The others were dead now; the last rites of Man's final funeral were finished. He moved out into the glaring sunlight on the top of his hill.

He wore a heavy, metallic suit that at the same time protected and supported his frail, aged body. He looked out at his world of sliding mud and slag through cataract eyes. Images danced and wavered over the barren landscape.

Finally, with an effort, he reached up and removed the bulky, transparent helmet that covered his head.

He drew in a breath of contaminated, diseased and radioactive air and exhaled it noisily.

It was his first breath of fresh air in over ninety years, and the first change from almost a century of unending boredom and repetition. His eyes might see a few more barren sunrises and sunsets, but no more . . . no more.

"So it goes," he said, and sighed.

It would be worth it.

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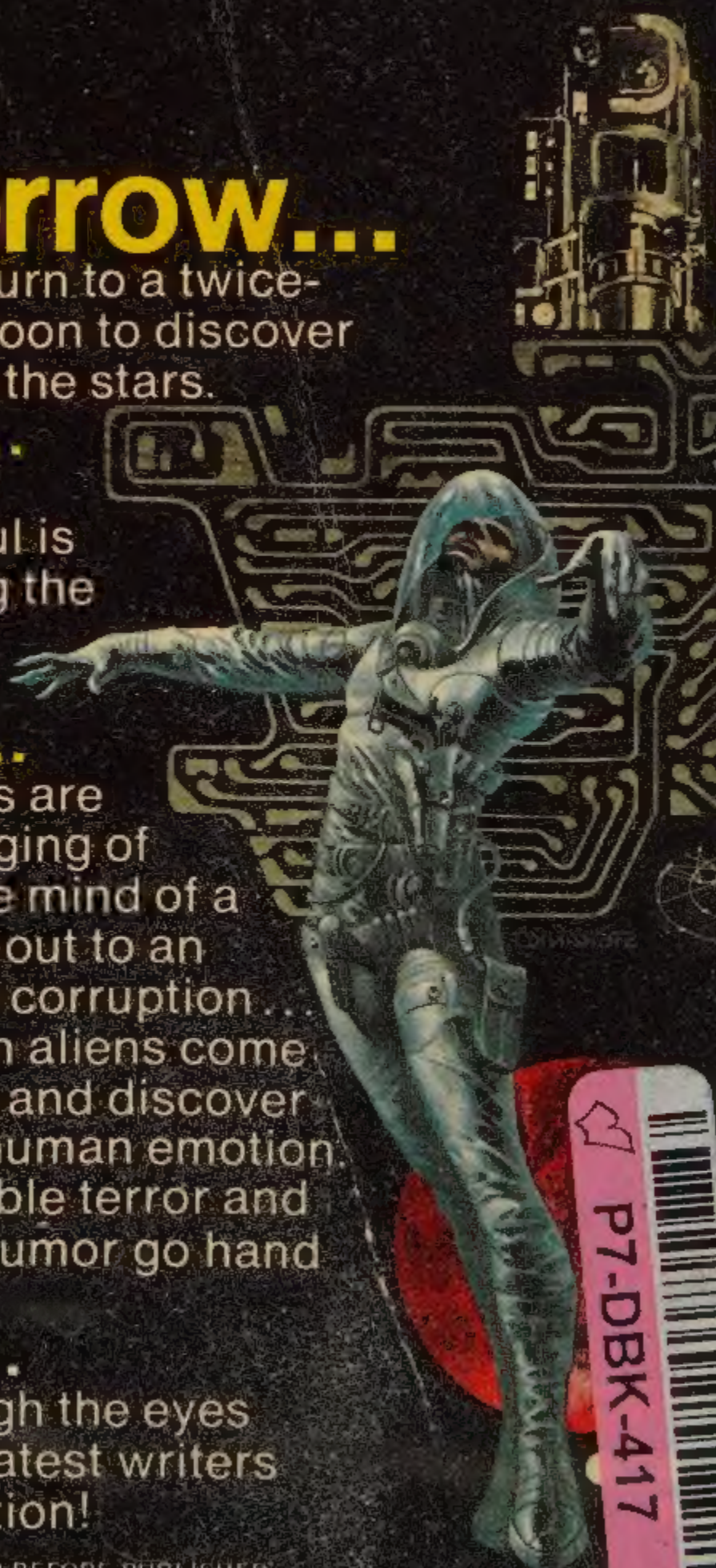
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